

The background of the book cover is a dramatic illustration of Lord Krishna standing in a chariot. Krishna is depicted with a fair complexion, wearing a yellow dhoti and a red shawl draped over his left shoulder. He is adorned with a peacock feather in his crown, a garland of pearls, and various golden armlets and bangles. He holds a mace (gada) in his right hand. The chariot is dark blue with ornate carvings, including a peacock head at the front. The scene is set against a sunset sky with orange and purple hues, and the sea is visible in the background.

DEEP TRIVEDI

The Author of the Bestseller 'I am The Mind'

I am Krishna

BIOGRAPHY OF KRISHNA

2

Trials & Triumphs in Mathura

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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 Number of Quotations on Human Life' (about 12038) on subjects such as Soul, Human Life, Psychology, Laws of Nature, Destiny and much more. He also holds the record for 'Maximum Lectures on Human Life', 'Maximum Lectures on Psychological Aspects of Tao

Te Ching', 'Maximum Lectures on Ashtavakra Gita' and 'Maximum Lectures on Bhagavad Gita', which is 168 hrs, 28 mins, 50 secs in 58 days in different national and international record books. These lectures have been delivered in front of a live audience across India.

The 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 **deeptrivedi.com**

DEEP TRIVEDI – The Speaker

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 Bhagavad Gita, Tao Te Ching, Ashtavakra Gita and:

Laws of Nature
Time and Space
Religion
DNA-Genes
Path of Life
Day-Sleep
Mind and Brain
Personality
Complex
Phobias
Guilt
Involvement
Expectation
Partiality
Acceptance
Natural Intelligence
Power of Transformation
Marriage
Freedom
Future
Hypocrisy
Creativity
Concentration
Joy and Happiness
Wealth
Good-Bad
God
Ego
Anger
Self-Confidence
Love
Confusion

From the Author's Desk

‘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 perceive 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 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 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, Mahabharata 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. Pronouncing 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 state that Krishna became great because he was destined to. Possibly, it may give you an excuse to conceal your inability to attain greatness. But in truth, by linking the

greatness of an individual to his destiny, we insult his skills and hard work. That is the reason, 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 detailed 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 Composed around 400 BC, this Buddhist text mentions

Katha	Krishna in the Jataka Tale titled Ghat Pandit.
9. Arthashastra	This renowned political treatise, written by Kautilya in 400 BC, refers to Krishna as Vaasudeva, 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. Composed between 5-10 Century AD, the entire 10th

Bhagavad Purana	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 proves 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.

Story so far...

***Very few have been able to rejoice in both victory and defeat...
I was one of them...!***

Born in a dungeon in Mathura, I escaped death when I was whisked away by my father Vasudeva on a dark stormy night and taken to Gokula, a settlement on the outskirts of Mathura. It was here in this small village, that I spent my childhood in the loving arms of my doting mother Yashoda and grew up to be the apple of everyone's eyes. Though I had a childhood that was eventful and fraught with danger, as the ominous shadow of Uncle Kansa always loomed large over me, I was Krishna – the *karmaveer*, who never gave up and emerged victorious in every adversity that came my way. Surmounting all odds, winning soon became my second nature. When I saw ancient traditions like *Indrapuja* being practised at the expense of human life, I opposed it with all my might and ensured its end. When a pack of wolves attacked my beautiful village Gokula, I decided to relocate with my beloved *Gokulwasis* and found a new abode in

Vrindavan at the foothills of Govardhana Hills, near the River Yamuna.

As I grew up, my charm grew manifold and every gopi on the street of Vrindavan had but one name in their heart – Kanha. A heartthrob that I was, all the gopis in Vrindavan were bewitched by my flute playing and my endearing smile. But I was smitten by the enchanting beauty of Radha. She was the love of my life and the one I looked upon for inspiration and guidance. For me, life was a beautiful journey of ups and downs, where sometimes I fought demons like Keshi and Putana, and at times, experienced the height of bliss by enjoying my share of *raasleelas* with the gopis and my beloved Radha. I thought this was how the story of my life would pan out to be – a cowherd Krishna indulging in *raasa* with the gopis and fighting demons. But Nature had a different plan for me. An interesting and unexpected chapter in my life unfolded when I was invited to Mathura by my Uncle Kansa. Though I knew he had always been baying for my blood, I wasn't aware that it would all happen so soon. When I reached Mathura, he tried with all his might to erase my existence from the face of this earth with his evil machinations, but I escaped unscathed. However, when he threatened to kill everyone including my father and the gopas, I had no option but to slay him for the larger good. For, I always believed that when someone becomes a threat to humanity, he must be eliminated. Though I had taken this huge step with pure intentions, I knew, with this step, I was putting my life at great risk. I thought my life had come to an end, for I, an ordinary cowherd had slain the King of Mathura in front of his own subjects. Now, what would his soldiers do? How will the people of Mathura react? Will I be at the receiving end of their fury for having killed their King? Or will my life be spared....?

Chapter 1

Turning Down The Throne Of Mathura

Chaos still prevailed all over the ground. Fearing reprisals from the soldiers, few people were now rushing towards their homes. However, many others still stood frozen, curious to witness the course of events that would follow. As the crowds thinned and there was a semblance of order, I too became less apprehensive and regained my composure. Needless to say, as soon as I felt relaxed, audaciously, my gaze met those of Rukmini's. She too appeared to have calmed down. And to tell you the truth, Rukmini looked lovely in her calm countenance. I was so taken in by her innocent looks, that before I could stop myself, I ended up waving to her. Incredibly, she too rose from her seat, flashed me a big smile and waved back! I was euphoric! I did not expect a princess to respond so sweetly. I was in seventh heaven, and my heart was soaring. In this blissful state, I felt as if I was walking on clouds. But unfortunately, my happiness was short-lived. For just then, her brother, Rukmi, noticed this entire scene. For reasons unknown to me, Rukmini's brother did not react favourably to her greeting me in this manner. He took hold of her hand and pulled her down to her seat. I did not like Rukmi using force in this manner with Rukmini...my Rukmini! I felt dejected. To tell you the truth, this behaviour of Rukmi distressed me, and the realisation swept over me that Rukmini was not mine as yet. However, before I could recover from this disappointment, another shocking incident took place. Suddenly, the commander decided to take all the women, princesses and princes back to the palace. Thus, accompanied by heavily armed soldiers, they were all escorted back. Sadly, Rukmini too had to leave with them. This act of the commander reaffirmed my realisation that Rukmini was not mine as yet. Standing in the packed royal gallery, I watched with a heavy heart as my dream girl walked away from the festival ground.

Nevertheless, as soon as Rukmini left, my entire focus shifted to the happenings in the festival ground. This too was a peculiar attribute of my mind which allowed me to shift focus from one activity to another in the blink of an eye. And this attribute was very much needed today. It was this attribute only which would help me to keep a close watch on the swiftly changing circumstances and the rapidly occurring events. With Rukmini's departure, I once again became fully aware, and as soon as I became aware I became fully alert too. For, a great king like Kansa could have many well-wishers who may have loathed my killing him. They might attack me to avenge Kansa. Thus, despite what I wanted, there was still a strong possibility of yet another conflict. Under the circumstances, it was certainly not safe to remain standing in the royal

gallery. As soon as this thought struck me, I immediately left the royal gallery with bhaiya and went and stood near the public gallery. I had run so fast from the royal gallery, as if death itself was close on my heels, and the probability of that too was very high, as a large majority of Kansa's supporters were seated in the royal gallery and could unexpectedly attack me at any time. I was much safer among the commoners. But, I was well aware that no matter where I stood, I would still not be totally safe. Nevertheless, I went and stood amongst the common people in the public gallery. Everyone was looking at me in awe! The crowd continued to thin at this gallery. This ground which was packed to capacity earlier, was now so empty that to enter and exit the ground was not difficult anymore. On the far side, the royal gallery was now almost empty, and Kansa's empty throne was also clearly visible from here. However, there were still about twenty to thirty armed soldiers standing guard. I was not unduly worried, for as long as they didn't come towards me, I was safe. Even so, my eyes were still glued to the royal gallery. I was very carefully observing all that was transpiring there. As I watched, both wives of Kansa, Asti and Praapti, who were also my aunts, walked to where Kansa's body lay, and began to wail. They both were justified in their mourning of their dead husband and there was no threat to me in them doing so. However, it must be admitted that their wailing wrenched at our heartstrings. The first queen, sobbing uncontrollably, said, "You were so powerful, so strong and exceptional! How could you possibly die? You gave us so much love! Now how will our children live without you as orphans and we as widows? You looked after us with such care, gave us such comforts! How could you suddenly abandon us and relegate us to lead a life full of misery?" Seeing the elder queen lament in this manner, the second queen could not contain herself and cried even louder, "Why was your love not eternal? Why did you not take us with you? What will we do living without you?"

To tell you the truth, everything had happened so fast that it was only now, on seeing the anguish of my aunts, that I had realised for the first time, that I had killed the great King Kansa. Otherwise, until now, it all seemed like a dream to me! The killing of the King by an eighteen-year-old boy was certainly not an ordinary occurrence. More shockingly, the king was slain by an ordinary cowherd boy from Vrindavan, a village that was completely dependent on rearing cows that belonged to the royal palace! However, at present, it was the lamentation of my aunts that was troubling me. The truth was that their continuous wailing had put me in a quandary. My head had begun to reel. Suddenly, the scene of Lohita's wife lamenting over his dead body flashed before my eyes. You too might remember that her lamentation had incited the entire crowd. I knew well enough that often, a crowd is very easily swayed by

sympathy, and without thinking, usually rallies around the person who is affected. And in the present situation, it was undoubtedly my aunts who were the affected party. Besides, I, unfortunately, was standing in the midst of the same crowd that stood watching my aunts wail. All in all, I was in a peculiar situation. Even though Kansa was dead, I was not feeling safe anywhere. Neither in the royal gallery where I initially stood, nor in the public gallery where I stood at present. That is why, it is said that you must think a thousand times before stirring up a hornet's nest.

Nevertheless, with no safe place in sight, I immediately beckoned to the cowherd boys to come and stand with me. I thought that four of us together were better than two, in this hour of crisis. As for bhaiya, he did not seem overly worried. Wherever I went, he just followed me like a shadow, protecting and standing guard over me. It was anyway far easier for him to use physical prowess than to think. And at this moment, that too was equally important. In the present situation, the need for the use of strength could arise at any moment, especially considering the fact that my aunts were really distraught and still wailing in an undulating crescendo. Their grief was justifiable too, as they were, after all, Kansa's wives. But for me, their continued wailing was becoming a cause of worry. To tell you the truth, at this moment, my mind had become numb; I just could not comprehend what to do and what not to. And on the other hand, my aunts were incessantly weeping, with no sign of abating. On the contrary, their wailing kept on getting louder with time. Just then, one of my aunts cried out, "You always slept on a soft bed. Are you not uncomfortable lying on this hard ground?" While uttering these words, she began wailing even louder. Now, what difference would it make for a dead person whether he was lying on a soft bed or on the hard ground? They were unnecessarily weeping and making the crowd emotional. With these thoughts running through my mind, I had just started to feel exasperated, when Kansa's mother too arrived at the scene, wailing at the top of her voice. Aargh...There seemed to be no end to my problems! Kansa's mother's display of grief was truly unique. Every time she looked at her son's body, she would collapse in a faint. Then, upon regaining her senses, she would again cry out, "Oh, my son! Oh, my son!" and collapse yet again! What an amazing sequence of events! Instead of improving, the situation was getting all the more complicated. Interestingly, the people who were causing these problems for me were all my relatives! After all, Kansa's mother was my grandmother, wasn't she? Kansa's wives too were my aunts. That is to say, my life was put in peril by my own relatives. I could not comprehend whether I should walk up to my grandmother to express my love for her and seek her blessings since I was meeting her for the first time, or whether I should express

my anger at her boisterous display of grief. And why was she lamenting so much for such a cruel son? ‘O, my dear grandmother! Please stop. Do you not understand that your crying will put your grandson in great peril? Grandmother, just try to recollect. This is the same man who had imprisoned your husband, my grandfather, for so many years. Then why are you lamenting so much for him?’ Well, who would explain all this to my grandmother? All these were just thoughts swirling in my head. I could certainly not go anywhere near my grandmother now. That would surely put my life in even graver danger. What an unfortunate soul I was! Today, I was seeing my grandmother for the first time, and that too in such circumstances! In fact, this was the first time that I had seen my aunts up close. The two were real sisters, and that was evident not just from the similarity in their facial features, but also from the way they were weeping! The most remarkable part was, in this family get together, it was my first and last meeting today with Uncle Kansa. To put it briefly, I was meeting my close relatives for the first time in eighteen years and that too under these strange set of circumstances! How incredible Nature was and how incredible was its son, Krishna!

At present, the mourning of my grandmother and my aunts was fast becoming a threat to my life. Their incessant weeping could at any moment create an adverse situation and incite the people of Mathura against me. As it is, crowds have always been emotional; swayed by feelings, they tend to be unpredictable, as they fail to differentiate between right and wrong. It is also a well-known fact that a lot of disturbances are created only because of these sentimental fools. And an even greater truth is that man either becomes a sentimental fool, or he resorts to cruelty. It is always one extreme or the other; he fails to find a middle ground. He just does not know how to maintain a balance. This is what I had said later to Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita, *“Those who are cruel and tyrannical are definitely sinners. And I certainly destroy such miscreants. But bear in mind, Arjuna! Those who are swayed by their emotions are sinners too; the only difference is that they cause their own destruction.”*¹ You would remember that at that particular moment, Arjuna too was caught in a whirlpool of emotions and wanted to destroy himself. That was why I had said to him, *“Let go of all desires and attachments. For, any attachment that precludes you from performing your karma is worthless.”*² Whatever I had enunciated in the Bhagavad Gita was drawn from my life’s experiences. That is why I say that the Gita is nothing but the essence of my life’s experiences. As you are well aware, it was my nature to learn from every circumstance, every incident and every person, and then deeply reflect upon these encounters and analyse them.

Therefore, from this perspective, the Bhagavad Gita is nothing but the essence of the lessons that I learnt in my life. Besides, I was such an avid learner that even now, the mourning of my aunts was teaching me many valuable lessons. For one, I could clearly discern that no matter how cruel a person is, he invariably loves some people close to him, and naturally, he also behaves well with those he loves. That is to say, even the most inhumane person has a tiny flame of humaneness glowing in his heart. Going by that reasoning, Kansa must have certainly behaved well with his wives, which was precisely the reason why they were so grief-stricken at his death. This implied that even wicked individuals are surrounded with people who love them. This meant that the relationship which two people share depends on their behaviour with each other. It is not dependent on their actions in life, or the sort of person they actually are. But in my opinion, this is wrong. Actually, the relationship one individual shares with another should be based on his true self. If Kansa was wicked, then he should be considered wicked by everyone. Then, even if his behaviour with my aunts was good, they should have remained upset with him. As far as I am concerned, my relationship with a person has never been dependent on his behaviour with me. I always gave importance to his behaviour with all of humanity, and this is precisely the way it should be.

Another aspect that was becoming clear to me was that nobody dies alone. With a person's death, his entire family, all the people who were dependent on him and all those who loved him, also die in part. Indeed, the very moment this realisation swept over me, I decided that killing any human being should be my last resort. As long as there is another alternative available to solve the problem, nobody should be killed unnecessarily. Even today, I had killed Kansa only because I was left with no option. He tried to kill me by pitting me against a mad elephant, but I was not offended. He cunningly planned to finish me off by arranging to have me wrestle with Chanoor, but I still did not feel any animosity towards him; because until then, his enmity was only with me. But when he extended his enmity to include all the gopas³ and several *Mathurawasis* (the inhabitants of Mathura) including father and endangered their lives, I had no option but to kill him. What I mean to say is, I never considered the person who was hostile to me or hated only me as my enemy. In my opinion, only a person who was hostile to humanity was my enemy. Meaning, the person who makes life a living hell for others was my real enemy. That is why at the time of killing Kansa, neither did I think of Mother Devaki's pain, nor did I grieve for my murdered brothers, and there was no anger in me whatsoever for all the attempts Kansa had made to kill me. These events were all in the past and well behind

me. And I believed that Kansa was merely an instrument for whatever had transpired in the past. It was not in my nature to be vengeful, and if it were to be understood from that standpoint, I too was just an instrument to prevent something terrible from taking place. Therefore, the death of Kansa at my hands should also be looked upon as me being instrumental in his slaying, and not as an act driven by revenge, enmity or ire.

Well, I have spent enough time on my thoughts and analysis. Let me get back to the strange set of events which were presently unfolding before me. The cruel Kansa was dead, my grandmother was again unconscious and my aunts, overcome by emotion, were still weeping. And I, standing at a distance, was watching this emotional drama. There was no telling what turn these emotional events would take. Actually, my mother and father were in the most awkward situation. Mother appeared to be really grief-stricken; after all, she too had lost her dear brother. Perhaps, she was also very apprehensive and anxious, as it was her own beloved son who had slain her brother. After all, she had already lost a brother; what if she lost her dear son as well? Meanwhile, father was still sitting in a tense posture with his brows furrowed in worry. Poor soul, he was in no position to utter a word or even grieve. It was the king who had been killed at the hands of his son. Truly, I had put both of them in a quandary at the time of my birth and even today, having killed Kansa, I had put them in a strange dilemma. The plight of Nanda and the cowherd boys from Vrindavan was far worse. This was because, though they were not a party to my act, Kansa threatening them and my slaying Kansa thereafter, had linked them to this event. So, it was certain that they too would have to face the consequence of any retaliatory action taken against me.

I was still thinking about all this, when suddenly, the commander of Kansa's army arrived at the scene accompanied by his soldiers. Surprisingly, he was escorting King Ugrasena, my maternal grandfather. My present deliberations came to a halt on witnessing this scene, but my mind was immediately engaged in wondering what other unexpected set of events were about to transpire. Deep down, I began to think, 'Commander, as if the commotion created by my aunts and grandmother was not enough, that you have now also brought this gentleman to add to it?' Well, his arrival was just the beginning. More surprises were in store for us. For, behind my grandfather—the old king—were all the princes from other states who had recently been escorted out. This surprise did bring with it a measure of happiness as well, for the love of my life, Rukmini too had come back with them. However, at this moment, I thought it wiser to focus on the new developments taking place rather than getting distracted by Rukmini. Because, if I was alive, I had the rest of my life to

admire Rukmini, but now

it was imperative that I focussed on saving my life first. To that effect, there was no scope for my attention to be diverted at this time, as new developments were taking place so rapidly, that this simple cowherd boy was unable to make head or tail out of it, or think of anything else. Speaking of my grandfather, on close observation, he appeared to be a very simple man. No doubt, he too looked just as unhappy. After all, he too had lost his son. For some time, he just sat next to Kansa's dead body, lost in deep thought, and then suddenly, stroking his son's head, he stood up. As soon as he got up, he not only consoled my distraught aunts, but also asked after my unconscious grandmother. Immediately after that, he sent the commander to call me. It was splendid the way Grandfather Ugrasena had done all of this within a couple of minutes.

On being summoned, I naturally became a little anxious. I could really not understand his motive behind summoning me. To tell you the truth, I had become anxious with the foreboding of unforeseen danger. Now, whether I could fathom the motive or not, I had to comply. If I did not comply willingly, then I would surely be arrested and taken to his presence. Thinking thus, I quietly started walking with them. Bhaiya too began to follow me. Understandably so, for how could he abandon me at such a crucial hour? At this point in time, I was in a weird state of mind. A million thoughts were racing through my mind. No doubt, I was well prepared for an unexpected attack. But what if I was arrested for killing the king? If that were to happen, then all my caution and heroism would come to naught. I was already very scared on seeing the horde of soldiers who had stationed themselves near grandfather. On one hand, a thousand questions were cropping up in my mind, and on the other, I was keeping a close watch on every move of my grandfather, because everything depended on what was going on in his mind. Meanwhile, the crowds had already dispersed on the ground. Including us, there were barely five hundred people present. However, the royal gallery had become completely packed once again. The hustle and bustle in the royal gallery had also increased. It was quite evident that the next move was clearly up to my grandfather. Having left the public gallery, we too were crossing the open ground and moving slowly towards the royal gallery. Despite the danger looming over me, deep inside, I was impressed by my grandfather. What impressed me most was that although he had come out of prison after so many years, he still had a commanding presence.

I had thought that after spending so many years in prison, he would be a sick, tired and dejected person. But he had proved all my presumptions wrong. And when someone proves my presumptions wrong, I find it interesting! To tell you the truth, if a person could be easily understood or is predictable, then how can

he be called a human being in the first place? He becomes a mere object then, and an object can be easily used! In this regard, grandfather was the second such person I had seen after *Acharya*⁴ Shrutiketu, who had such an impressive personality. Well, was it not enough to have the opportunity of seeing such a great personality before I died? Otherwise, you very well know, that so far, I had used all human beings as if they were mere objects. Whether it was mother's love or father's reticence, whether it was brother's anger or Radha's obstinacy, all had ultimately proven advantageous to me alone. But conversely, nobody had ever been able to use me, nor will anyone be able to do so. That was because I was neither obstinate nor did I have a fixed nature. So, bear this in mind, if a person has an inflexible nature or if he is stubborn about something, then he can be used as an object by others.

Now that I have spoken so much about my nature, let me tell you something about my art of learning too! Who knows, whether I would ever get this opportunity again? You already know that for me, life was like a school. I went on to imbibe whatever I learnt here to transform myself. It is true that no child is born learned; it is life that teaches him all that he needs to learn. Therefore, I believe that a person's progress depends on how fast and how much he can learn from life. Take my life as an example; all my life, I never missed out on a single opportunity to learn. I never had to learn anything twice. And it was this ability to grasp combined with my ability to mould myself accordingly, which together built my present personality. Indeed, it was because of my constant endeavour to know my own mind, and that of others, that today, my eyes, my intelligence, my speech and now even my smile were becoming the most powerful weapons in my arsenal. For, a person who can understand other people's minds is capable of transforming them as well. Similarly, if a person has complete control over his own mind, then he can very easily control the minds of others too. And as for the one who has control over his own mind and that of others, who in this world then, can defeat him? Therefore, there is no knowledge beyond this which is worth gaining. Indeed, what learning can be superior to the one that allows you to control others? There is yet another advantage of it that your own mind always remains under your control. And, if you are the master of your mind, then what can be a greater achievement than that? Take me for example! My mind had always been under my control. That was the reason why, even though I was besotted with Rukmini, my attention at present was not diverted by her. Life is all about choices. At this moment, the choice before me was between gazing at Rukmini and keeping a watchful eye on the commander's actions. It was between winning Rukmini's heart and reading grandfather's

mind. If I did not pay attention to Rukmini, there would be no great loss, but if I diverted my attention from the commander's moves, my life could be in danger. If I did not gauge what was on my grandfather's mind, then I might have to spend the rest of my life in prison. To put it succinctly, 'as long as one is alive, anything is possible.' This was applicable not just to the present situation, but it holds true at any juncture and in every situation in life. Meaning, there are not just one or two, but countless such choices to be made in life. If you mull over it, the slaying of Kansa was also a choice that I had made. The choice was between multiple deaths and the death of one person. It was either the death of all the cowherd boys, my father and myself or just Kansa—and the choice I made was to slay Kansa. Incredible...! Death was staring me in the face, and my mind was caught up in contemplation—and not just ordinary analysis but profound contemplation! Perhaps, confrontation with death awakens one's supreme consciousness! And with the supreme consciousness awakening, my self-confidence returned too! Now that my self-confidence had returned, I slowed down my pace and strode purposefully with determination towards grandfather. I thought, "Let's see what he has to say!"

As I was gradually heading towards the royal gallery, my steps in that direction were making the cowherd boys extremely anxious. As for mother, she had plunged into an abyss of despair ever since Uncle Kansa's death. Father, who was keenly aware of the political implications, also appeared very anxious. The people also appeared to be very restless, as they had no idea of what was about to happen. And don't assume that there was no restlessness in the royal gallery. In fact, everyone there appeared ill at ease, except my grandfather. Along with the commander, all the princes who had come from the other states were also restive; nobody knew what would happen next. For, at this time, the reins were in the hands of grandfather, and he appeared so calm and collected, that from his appearance it was not easy to discern the storm hidden within him. What I mean to say is, that including me, everyone was in suspense. Let alone us, even Rukmini appeared restless. Meaning, if there was anyone who was an exception to this, it was only grandfather. Now whether his calm demeanour was an indication of something positive or not would only be known after reaching the place where he stood. And that wasn't very far either. Within no time, I reached there and stood before grandfather and the commander. Obviously, I first touched grandfather's feet reverently, exuding great self-confidence. In return, he too embraced me affectionately. As soon as he embraced me, I felt my life force returning to my stressed limbs, for the manner in which he had embraced me, clearly showed, that now, there was no danger to my life from the royal palace. Seeing this loving exchange between the grandfather and grandson, all

the people anxiously witnessing this drama too breathed a collective sigh of relief. The moment grandfather embraced me, mother's and father's eyes welled up with tears. Full of hope, I thought, 'When this family, which has stayed away from each other for some reason or the other is coming together, then maybe my aunts must have also had a change of heart. Perhaps, their latent love for their nephew may also pour forth.' With this vain hope, I turned towards them. But alas, instead of feeling any affection for me, they simply ignored me. Moreover, it appeared as if they did not even approve of the cordial and affectionate manner in which grandfather greeted me.

One special quality that I possessed was, no matter what the situation was, I would always try to carefully study the minds of all the people around me, so that if I detected even the slightest trace of malice and deceit which could harm me or others, I could take action while there was still time. Now, it was quite clear that my aunts were as angry with me as they were before. Nevertheless, this was not of immediate concern to me, as they could not interfere with the functioning of the royal palace. At this moment, what mattered most was what grandfather thought, and he had displayed a positive attitude towards me by warmly embracing me, even though his greeting me with such affection had taken me by surprise. And as it is said that one surprise follows another, and one joy comes after the other; so, soon after he had surprised me with his embrace, he amazed me a second time with his words. Grandfather Ugrasena stroked my head lovingly, and all of a sudden said, "Kingdoms are meant to be ruled by the brave. And you have already displayed your bravery first by killing the mad elephant Kuvalyapeed, then killing Chanoor and thereafter killing Kansa. You love the people of Mathura dearly; this is clearly evident from your attitude. The fact that the people of Mathura too have begun to love you is clearly apparent from the atmosphere in this arena."

Saying this, he fell silent, but I was dumbstruck. Though I felt good on hearing him praise me, I still could not understand where he was heading with this. However, I was convinced that there was no threat to my life. And naturally, at present, understanding this was far more important than understanding anything else. While I wore a confused expression, the princes certainly looked downcast on hearing these words from grandfather. The situation appeared to me like a new mystery; I couldn't comprehend what they stood to gain or lose by what grandfather had said. While I was puzzled by all these thoughts, grandfather saw me standing still with a lost expression on my face, and then without any further delay, he continued, "After the death of Kansa, Mathura has become bereft of its king, and no kingdom can function without a king even for a single day. Now, the rule is, whoever kills the king is entitled to the throne.

Besides, you are our grandson, and your father is a close relation of the royal family. Therefore, considering your capability, on behalf of all the people of Mathura and on behalf of the royal palace, I request you to take hold of the reins of Mathura. This request of mine should be considered as the decision of the royal household. Thus, I humbly request you to accept the crown of Mathura.”

I was stunned! What had happened was totally unexpected! Now, tell me, what would happen when a simple cowherd boy, who has been lost in thoughts of death, is suddenly given an offer to become a king? Will any of his senses work?... I had not only lost my ability to think, but my senses of sight and sound were also temporarily incapacitated. I had come fully prepared to be killed, ground into the dust, but instead, grandfather had elevated me to the skies! I stood still as if I was carved out of stone! On the other hand, as soon as grandfather put forth this proposal to me, the people began shouting their support from all corners of the arena. Naturally, this resounding chorus immediately brought me back to my senses. However, even though I had returned to my senses, I still couldn't believe what was happening. I, a mere child, would become a king?! When I failed to understand anything, I pinched myself hard. Was I in the middle of a dream? But no! Right before me, Kansa lay dead, and the crowd was voicing its support; all this assured me that I was not dreaming. If this was indeed reality, then it was necessary that I composed myself. I immediately concentrated on increasing my presence of mind, for it was time for the child to become mature. One could deal with this situation only by mature thinking. This was what I was mulling over, but in stark contrast to my composed demeanour, bhaiya and the cowherd boys had gone berserk with happiness on hearing this news. Father too had recovered a little, but mother, she seemed to be unaffected. Regardless of whether it affected my mother or not, her darling son was well and truly trapped! Grandfather had with great ease proposed that this cowherd boy be made the king. But let alone becoming a king; for me, a mere cowherd boy, it was difficult to even comprehend what was happening. A few moments ago, what lay ahead of me was the life of a cowherd in Vrindavan, and that too, if I could escape from here alive! And now, I was being offered a throne! Perhaps, no other person must have got the opportunity to make such a quantum leap in a single moment, and that too in such a radically opposite direction. Forget becoming a king, this was the very first time in my life that I had even set my eyes on one! So how was I, a poor cowherd, to know that the one who kills the king was entitled to become a king himself? Anyway, I had to consider the proposal put forward by grandfather. Not only was it essential to analyse the situation very carefully, but it was also imperative to give an appropriate reply to my grandfather. Since

grandfather had placed so much trust in me, I had to at least impress him by showing some maturity. If the proposal was for a position beyond my present status, then it was also necessary for me to rise above and think beyond my current station in life. My mind was caught up in a whirlwind of thoughts, and I began to evaluate every aspect of this proposal—from the smallest to the biggest.

Oblivious of my mental turmoil, bhaiya and the cowherd boys were still dancing with joy. All the people in the arena were beginning to warm up to the proposal. As a matter of fact, I too was elated. This was because, firstly, my life had been spared, and secondly, in a fraction of a second, I had become eligible for Rukmini's hand in marriage. Obviously, as soon as thoughts of Rukmini came to my mind, my gaze hungrily began to seek her out. She too was looking at me with eyes filled with wonder. And as soon as I locked eyes with her, she not only waved her hand by way of a greeting but simultaneously, she also gestured me to go ahead and accept the proposal. I wondered why...then it occurred to me, what did she have to lose by urging me to accept the proposal? She would not be impacted; it was I who would become a king! In my heart, the intense love I had for her had its own significance, but the future of the people of Mathura was also important to me. All in all, it was a momentous decision, and I was not in favour of accepting or rejecting the proposal in haste. Before responding to it, I wanted to analyse the pros and cons and consider all the aspects. But exhaustive analysis of this matter in such a short span of time was not so easy. To tell you the truth, my train of thought was heading in two different directions. On one hand, my mind was caught up in thrilling Rukmini by accepting the proposal, and on the other, I was determined to take steps only according to my capability. Caught between these conflicting thoughts, I focussed all my attention on understanding the sequence of events that were unfolding in quick succession so that I could rightly know my options and make an informed decision, either in the 'affirmative' or in the 'negative.' But as I just said, analysing and contemplating over this matter in the time span available was not so simple. This was because, firstly, in an instant, grandfather had elevated my status from a cowherd to one suited to become king. By offering a kingdom to a poor cowherd, he had elevated my status to a different level. Now I, who had walked only on uneven, rocky paths so far, would naturally take time to get accustomed to royalty. Secondly, it was the first time in my life that I was suddenly confronted by so many unforeseen incidents in succession. Just when I managed to deal with the first, a second one would crop up and then the third and so on. The root cause of all these unforeseen incidents was grandfather himself. I could have recovered from all that had happened and even arrived at a

conclusion, but my problem was, I just could not transcend his influence upon me even if I wanted to come out of the spell he had cast over me with his impressive presence of mind. He had arrived on the scene just a few minutes ago, but in this short span of time, he had managed to accomplish so much.

The first thing he had done was that he had brought all the visiting princes with him. By bringing the princes with him, he proved to the princes that though the king had been killed, the situation in Mathura was now under control. It was important to convey this impression to these princes as Mathura's political existence as a kingdom was at stake. By bringing them back with him to the arena, he had not only managed to salvage Mathura's pride and honour, but he had also saved Mathura from sliding into anarchy. Perhaps, grandfather wanted to send out a clear message to these visiting princes and to the subjects of Mathura, that even though Kansa was dead, Mathura was not a kingless city. Otherwise, some people, moved by the mourning of the aunts, could have possibly begun sympathising with them and supporting Kansa. On the other hand, there was no dearth of Kansa's enemies in Mathura either. As a result, Mathura would certainly have been split into two clear halves, and a civil war could have unleashed anarchy in Mathura. Also, grandfather's equanimity must be praised; the way he addressed the people was truly remarkable! It was so wonderfully worded that each word seemed to be loaded with meaning. He had just come straight to the arena from captivity; where for the first time, he tasted complete freedom after spending several years in prison, and what did he see? His heroic son lying dead on the dais! In spite of this, he had not lost his composure. Was this not worthy of praise? Indeed, I had learnt a very valuable lesson of life from this ability of his to maintain composure. Truly, today I had learnt from grandfather how to keep myself calm and composed under all circumstances. In truth, this lesson of maintaining my composure, which I had learnt from grandfather today, went on to become one of the greatest lessons of my life. For it is only when a person loses his mental balance in adverse circumstances that he is doomed. In fact, maintaining one's mental equilibrium is all the more necessary under such circumstances. What was even more wonderful, was that grandfather, even upon seeing his son's dead body, neither wept nor mourned. Neither did he get enraged, nor did his expressions register any grief. Moreover, he had finished paying his homage in a moment, as if nothing major had happened. It was this ability of his that had brought the situation under control in a fraction of a second. That is why I say that this entire world is a school and every incident and every individual, a teacher. Today, I had learnt many things, not only from King Ugrasena but also from Kansa and my aunts. The fact that we have no friends or foes in this world was proving to be

true. At times, we meet people who come before us as teachers, and at times, there are those who appear before us as students. In fact, if we note carefully, what is it that we exactly do twenty-four hours a day? We either spend time learning something ourselves or we create opportunities for others to learn.

You must be thinking that my explanation so far was good enough for you to have understood it well, but what about grandfather's proposal to crown me king? So, let me tell you! I am busy contemplating over it; but is it that easy to arrive at a decision? Just look at the scene unravelling over here; grandfather, who is discreetly trying to discern the thoughts storming in my mind by reading my expressions, is standing right in front of me. Also, in front of me, lay the corpse of Kansa which is why the proposal to become king was made to me. On my right, Rukmini stood with my aunts and on my left stood the princes. In this large crowd, Uncle Akrura can also be seen standing in a corner along with my parents. A number of voices can be heard even from the distant commoners' gallery. As I look at the commoners' gallery, I can clearly see my jubilant and cavorting cowherd friends. And right next to me stands bhaiya, whom I can see whichever way I glance. Such being the case, how could I, a cowherd, contemplate deeply over this matter? But this cowherd was smart enough to have not shown any emotions when King Ugrasena had spoken, and even now, he stood there, calm and composed. Meaning, even after receiving such an unexpected proposal, my face was devoid of any emotion. This was certainly the wonderful outcome of having learnt and practiced the art of maintaining one's composure under all circumstances, which I had just learnt from King Ugrasena. Otherwise, our expressions and behaviour usually give away our thoughts, and obviously, that does not serve us at all.

Incidentally, let me tell you one more thing; even though I had complete control over my expressions, my keen eyes were constantly trying to read the expressions of others. And what I saw was, most of the people in the arena were overwhelmed with joy at the prospect of me becoming the king. The cowherd boys too were going wild with happiness that their friend was going to become the king. On the other hand, Rukmini too was no less happy. And what do I say about bhaiya! He was already playing the role of the king's brother; he too was standing upright with pride just like royalty. Despite all these positive developments, my parents had still not been able to return to normalcy. Once or twice, grandfather had even gestured to me, asking about my decision, and I too had gestured to him back that I was thinking about it. Let me also mention that grandfather's proposal was not eliciting only positive reactions from everyone. Among the exceptions were my aunts who were extremely disturbed on hearing the proposal. How could they accept that the slayer of their dear husband, would

soon be made the king of Mathura? Besides my aunts, most of the princes too did not seem to be in favour of this proposal. In fact, Rukmi had stood up and was openly expressing his disapproval at this idea. Actually, I could understand the compulsion of these princes, after all, they were princes only because of their lineage. Perhaps, their apprehension stemmed from the fact that if the crown were to be handed over to an outsider—especially to a cowherd—and if this were to become a norm, then what would be the future of these poor fellows? Wouldn't it put a question mark on the very right of these princes to become King? But grandfather had to be commended; he had set aside tradition and taken the courageous decision to hand over the throne to a cowherd. Of course, the fact that I was actually his grandson must have also played an important part in this courageous decision that he had taken. On deep reflection, it was also clear that Rukmi had another reason to oppose this proposal. When we had fought the last time, had we not given him a sound thrashing? Moreover, the fact that Rukmini was showing a great amount of interest in me could also have been a major reason for his opposition. In fact, these were not the only ones in the list of people who were unhappy with this proposal. There were many others—the Yadava elite such as Satrajit, Kritverma and Satyaki, who were the chief guests at this function. In short, all the visiting princes and the politically influential citizens of Mathura, who were closely connected to the royal palace, were clearly not in favour of making me the King of Mathura. And opposed to this group, the majority of the common people who were gathered there had unanimously expressed their support to my nomination.

So, as usual, there was a difficult choice before me even today! The choice today, was not just between becoming a king or remaining a cowherd boy, but also between spending my life either as a king or as a poor cowherd. Well, who in this world wouldn't want to become a King? Besides, if I became the king, my chances of being with my dream Princess Rukmini, would also improve greatly. By becoming a King, I would instantly become her equal in every respect. You are also well-aware of how impressed I was by the regal personality of the princes. Imagine, what a lavish life I would live on becoming a King! I could get all my work done by servants. My glory would resonate across kingdoms, and I would be treated with respect. What I mean to say is that I could clearly see the personal benefits I would have if I became the king. But I also simultaneously understood that getting a sudden opportunity to become a king because of a certain set of circumstances was one thing, and being worthy of becoming a king and being capable of ruling well, was another thing altogether. So, I decided to shift my focus from personal interests to my capabilities and began to look for those qualities that made me suitable for a king's position. I

didn't have to look too far, for standing before me was the glorious King Ugrasena. Seeing his majestic personality and equanimity, I could not help but think that I did not as yet possess the qualities needed to be a king. A king has to face new trials and tribulations daily. New problems stare him in the face every day. When the simple task of taking care of one's family is not easy, then obviously, it is not a joke to look after an entire kingdom! Just take today's events for instance. If I were in King Ugrasena's place, I wouldn't have known what to do. Whatever else I might have done, I would certainly not have been able to do what he had accomplished so effortlessly. It would have never struck me to bring the princes to the arena. The way he had understood the situation, and the way he had taken control of the entire situation in a matter of moments, clearly showed that it required a different kind of intelligence, and years of experience to become a king. What it boiled down to was that I had now fully understood the prerequisites of being a king and had also realised that I was unqualified for this role. Having said that, if this were to be viewed from another angle, how long would it take for an intelligent and brave person like me to learn the art of being a good and able king? Did it make sense to let go of such a golden opportunity just because I was not fully qualified for it? Also, why forget that it was a matter that was close to my heart as well? By becoming a king, the chances of fulfilling my dream and marrying Rukmini would increase substantially.

No, no. Do not think for a moment that I was preparing myself to become the king. Because this was just the beginning of the problem. There were many more twists and turns that lay ahead. Agreed, the people of Mathura were with me, but what about these princes who were continually objecting to my becoming the king? But they were visiting princes, after all; for how long could they object? They would soon forget everything and leave for their own kingdoms. However, the main opposition was from the Yadava chiefs who could not stand the sight of me. And without their support, it would be impossible for me to continue to sit on the throne of Mathura. For, all things considered, the common people of Mathura were heavily under the Yadava chiefs' influence. They would quickly change their loyalties whenever the Yadava leaders instigated them. Meaning, it would be easy to become the king right now as grandfather had already proposed it; but continuing to remain a king for a long period of time seemed difficult. What if I was made a king for a few days and then made to flee from Mathura? Then 'King Krishna' would once again be back to taking the cows and buffaloes to graze! Jokes aside, becoming a king would entail daily conflict with these powerful Yadava leaders. And the ultimate outcome of this conflict would be unrest and anarchy in Mathura. So, if I were to

consider only my short-term benefit and choose to become the king, it would only spell endless trouble for Mathura. And it was not in my nature to jeopardise the peaceful life in Mathura for my personal gain. As far as Rukmini was concerned, she was my dream; and it was just as pleasurable to continue to dream, as it was to realise it. Actually, a dream is nothing but an opportunity to put oneself onto the path of progress. It is not necessary for it to be realised. Dreams are meant to be treasured. Of course, if time and circumstances are favourable, then there is no harm in realising one's dreams. But in order to fulfill one's dreams, how can one stoop so low to a sub-human level? It is not as if dreams have to be realised regardless of the cost. The art of dreaming is all about developing your capabilities and expanding your vision. And if dreams too are to be fulfilled at the cost of degrading oneself, then what is the difference between dreams and desires? Clearly, dreams lift a person to greater heights, whereas, desires spell his downfall. To cut a long story short, the essence of all these deliberations was, that even though becoming a king would immensely benefit me personally, neither was I qualified to become one nor did the current circumstances in Mathura favour such a move. All in all, it meant that I could not accept the proposal to become the King of Mathura. Though I had taken time to come to a decision, I was satisfied that my decision was the right one. Seeing me silent and lost in thought, this time around, grandfather decided to address me directly and said, "I want to make a personal request to you. Take as much time as you want to deliberate on my proposal but kindly give me permission to perform the last rites of my son, Kansa, with due respect."

His words shocked me out of my contemplation abruptly. Why was he seeking my permission? I was not the King of Mathura. Why then had grandfather taken my silence to mean that I was willing to become the King of Mathura? 'Oh, Kanhaiya! Quick, clear up the misunderstanding! Say what is on your mind. Otherwise, they might place a crown on your head, and you would still be standing here like a statue!' So, I quickly replied to my grandfather, "I have killed my Uncle neither to demonstrate my valour nor with any intention of becoming the next king. In my opinion, his death should be seen as a result of all his tyrannical actions. I should be regarded merely as an instrument that delivered the consequences of his terrible deeds. As for my becoming the king, let me make it clear, that at present, neither am I old enough to become the king nor am I qualified to become one, as I have been brought up as a simple cowherd boy. Therefore, in my opinion, only you are eligible to be the King of Mathura. There was a time not so long ago when there was great happiness and prosperity in Mathura under your wise rule. Therefore, I request you to once again be the instrument of bringing joy back to the kingdom of Mathura. And as far as

Uncle's last rites are concerned, he was a king, and his funeral ceremony ought to be performed according to the protocol reserved for royalty. In this regard, I do not think that the royal palace needs any sort of permission from me.”⁵

Saying thus, I fell silent. Concurrently, even grandfather hesitated in accepting the throne of Mathura. Meaning, the matter of who would become the next king of Mathura remained as knotty as before. But yes, in the meantime, it was decided that the last rites of King Kansa would be performed befitting his royal stature. To tell you the truth, even though grandfather had not accepted the proposal, somehow, one could distinctly sense his desire to be king once again getting kindled. Meaning, his hesitation in accepting the throne did not seem to carry enough conviction. And shrewd that I was, I had clearly noticed this. Actually, grandfather's, meaning King Ugrasena's desire to be king once again was understandable. He had been a successful king who had been thrown into the dungeon and was languishing there for many years. So now, at this stage in his life, it was but natural for him to wish to become the king once again in order to prove himself. Meanwhile, there was something else that had also occurred quite naturally. My suggestion to make grandfather the king was enough to trigger a ripple of happiness through the ranks of the Yadava leaders. It was quite easy to understand this. They clearly did not want to lose this golden opportunity to be rid of me. Interestingly, they had even begun shouting slogans in support of King Ugrasena. Moreover, they had even begun persuading King Ugrasena to accept the proposal. Grandfather, whose reluctance was anyway half-hearted, quickly gave in to the pressure of the Yadava leaders. He agreed to take charge of the kingdom of Mathura. As soon as grandfather agreed, I began to encourage the crowd to hail him. Thus, once again, preparations were in place to put the reins of the kingdom of Mathura in the able hands of 'King Ugrasena'.

It was good that at least this matter was resolved! But grandfather had laid down a strange condition for accepting the proposal which astounded everyone, including me. His condition was that he would accept the throne only if I agreed to stay on in Mathura and promise to help him manage the affairs of the kingdom. Now, there was no possibility of the Yadava leaders being in favour of this condition. But at present, they, unfortunately, were in no position to oppose grandfather either. And as for me, why would I object to his condition to have me continue my stay in Mathura? I had anyway wanted to learn about the administrative affairs of the kingdom, and moreover, I was his grandson. Besides, I had also taken a liking to Mathura. If I did not support my grandfather in his old age, then who would? All things considered, there was nothing in the condition he had set which would make me turn it down. It was my duty to

accept the condition set by grandfather, and secondly, the proposal was very much to my liking. I was considering this new development as an opportunity to become worthy of Rukmini!

The issue was soon resolved as soon as I agreed to it. It was decided that King Ugrasena would grace the royal throne once again. In a manner of speaking, today was a great day for both grandfather and grandson. It was more or less a similar kind of opportunity for both of us. On one hand, I, a cowherd boy had got the opportunity to become a king, while on the other, grandfather, who had thought that he would spend all his life languishing in prison, was crowned king within seconds. It is incredible the way time changes so swiftly! Within a moment it can turn a king into a pauper and a pauper into a king. This is why it is said, that in this world, there is no power greater than time. Grandfather and I had made our decisions, but needless to say, bhaiya and the cowherd boys were unhappy with my decision to decline the proposal to become the king. As far as the people of Mathura were concerned, it did not appear as if it made much difference to them whether it was grandfather or I who became the king. All that they wanted was deliverance from Kansa's tyranny, and that I had already given them, and at present, I was not so influential and well-known in Mathura that people would be disappointed at my refusal of the throne. As for the princes and the Yadava elite, they were happy that I had declined the proposal and did not become the king.

I have mentioned in detail, both the apprehensions and the relief that the different sections felt on hearing grandfather's proposal and my subsequent refusal. Now if I were to reflect on the part played by other people in this entire episode, then the most praiseworthy work had been done by the commander. It was the good fortune of Mathura that Jarasandha had played no part in the appointment of the commander of the army. This was also the reason why the commander was fully devoted to the welfare of Mathura. He had shown great intelligence and presence of mind by immediately freeing King Ugrasena after Kansa was slain, and bringing him to the festival arena. Speaking of the current atmosphere at the arena, many people had already left for their homes, anticipating trouble at any time. Even so, some brave and curious ones still lingered. Since all the primary issues had been resolved one by one, the atmosphere at the enclosure was also swiftly returning to normalcy. Mathura had found a new king and the danger of anarchy in Mathura had also been fully averted. Now, only one problem remained to be resolved, and that was performing Kansa's last rites with full honour. King Ugrasena had entrusted this responsibility to the commander, and the able chief promptly made the preparations for the funeral. Surprisingly, everyone, including the princes, was

still present at the ground. Meaning, no one was breaking the royal protocol. As for me, I had immediately taken my place behind grandfather and followed him with bhaiya in tow. No sooner were the preparations made, Kansa's funeral procession began right from the festival ground, with full royal honour. No one knew how, but the news of the procession spread like wildfire, and almost the entire populace of Mathura turned up to bid him farewell. Surprisingly, everyone seemed grief-stricken too; I had heard, "with the death of a person, all his sins are washed away", and today, I was witnessing it as well. Along with grandfather and me, several princes and the Yadava elite were also walking towards the royal cremation grounds meant exclusively for the royal family, and behind them, a crowd of around two and a half thousand people followed. Needless to say, King Kansa had become more popular in death than when he was alive. The last rites were over, and we had all returned to the arena once again; but as soon as we were back, we had to face another bit of bother. I had to face my mourning aunts once again! Indeed, my aunts' anger towards me was still a major cause for concern. Whenever we came face-to-face, or our eyes met, they would not fail to glower at me. From that murderous look in their eyes, it was clear that if they got an opportunity, they would devour me! To tell you the truth, this was yet another reason, albeit a small one, why I had refused to become the king of Mathura. For, it was clear from their furious expressions, that they would never let me sit peacefully on the throne of Mathura. Also, to my misfortune, their father Jarasandha, was a brave, heroic and mighty king. So, even if I had agreed to become the king of Mathura, it was certain that my aunts would have instigated their father against me, and caused me endless trouble. I will speak more of my aunts a little later. But right now, let me speak of Rukmini whom I had seen along with my aunts. Our eyes had met a couple of times, but I couldn't fathom her expressions. Actually, was I capable of understanding anything at all at this point in time?

It had been nearly evening by the time the last rites had come to an end, and all of us were terribly tired. Bhaiya and I, especially, were exhausted to the bone. We had fought three fierce battles in succession since morning, and had still not eaten a single morsel. We were in such a terrible condition that we were not even in a position to return home on our own feet. We somehow clambered on to Uncle Akrura's chariot and set off homewards. In fact, we had no strength left even to have a bath, but it was unavoidable as we had battled all day long and there was blood all over us. Actually, it was good that we took a bath, for we felt quite refreshed thereafter. The moment we felt a little refreshed, we began to feel unbearable pangs of hunger which were driving us insane. This was the first time in our life that we had remained without a morsel of food for so long.

Needless to say, as soon as the food was served, both bhaiya and I pounced on it like hungry lions. In a way, earlier today, we had also attacked Kansa and his demons like hungry lions. So, from that perspective, we were just continuing to do the same with the food! Today, for whatever reason, Uncle Akrura's hospitality was very special. The *Chhappan Bhog* - a meal with fifty-six delicacies, was served to us. This hospitality and this meal were certain proof of our increasing political eminence in the corridors of power at the palace.

No sooner had I finished devouring the *Chhappan Bhog* than I started feeling drowsy. I immediately went to my room and lay down on my bed. I kept tossing and turning for a long time, but in spite of being so fatigued, sleep seemed bent on evading me. My mind still continued to reflect upon the entire sequence of events that had transpired today. Today had really been an extremely long and eventful day. I had left home in the morning to take part in the wrestling competition, but I had ended up confronting a mad elephant. Thereafter, I had wrestled with Chanoor and eventually, due to circumstantial compulsions, I had had to kill Kansa. After that, all of a sudden, there was grandfather's proposal to make me the king of Mathura! That was indeed incredible! Oh yes! That reminds me, for a few moments between grandfather's offer and my declining it, I had become the king! Even though it was just for a brief period, today I, a cowherd boy, had enjoyed the status of a king! Henceforth, I could at least proclaim that I was no longer the ordinary cowherd boy from Vrindavan; I had been a king for a few minutes! Well, to round it up, today had been a day of victory for me in all respects. First, I had emerged victorious against the mad elephant. Then I had defeated Chanoor, and thereafter I had even outwitted Kansa. But to tell you the truth, all these victories paled in comparison to the achievement of securing the admiration of Rukmini. Her inspiration, her happiness over my victory, her repeated encouragement; was this not the greatest victory of my life? Indeed, for a charming cowherd boy, which other achievement could

be greater than attracting the attention of a princess?

But the question was, how did I gain such a great unexpected victory? On reflecting on it, I realised that many people had contributed to my march towards victory. Several people had been instrumental in my victory. Take Uncle Akrura for instance. Had he not alerted me about the evil designs of Kansa on our way from Vrindavan to Mathura, Kansa would have succeeded in killing me long back. Uncle Akrura aside, how can I undermine the contribution of that old man, who had passed a highly caustic comment on Kansa while we walked through the marketplace? Do you recollect what he had said, "The Uncle has invited his nephew to the festival. But just see, he did not have the decency to even send a

chariot for him. The poor fellow is walking around the marketplace on foot!” Then, you might also remember the clearly sarcastic comment made by the old man, that had instantly made me an astute politician. If I had not learnt politics in time, then Kansa would have probably succeeded in his nefarious plans. This was indeed true, and with this thought, I began contemplating once again. I was anyway unable to sleep now, so I thought I might as well mull over the sequence of events once again in the hope of discerning all their implications. Thousands of questions were cropping up such as, ‘Is there a power that governs our lives? Were Uncle Akrura and that old man sent by that power? If I had not become alert in time, or had not learnt political strategising in time, then would I have been killed? Is there a connection between my ability to learn and the fact that I am still alive? Indeed, if this was so, then it meant that this cosmic power was governing all our lives. This also meant that it was this power which made people or incidents an instrument and sends us messages to indicate what we have to do, when it is to be done, and where we have to go. If this is indeed the case, then our sole duty is to understand these messages and act according to them. Yes! This had to be the case. For, it was precisely by learning and understanding these messages that this cowherd boy from Vrindavan had got the opportunity to progress in life to almost becoming the King of Mathura. That being the case, what about those people who do not understand these messages? Perhaps, they are born as cowherds and die as cowherds.’

It was just as well that I was brave, strong and courageous, or else, wouldn't the elephant or Chanoor have killed me earlier? A voice in my mind spoke up, ‘Well, you had to be saved; that is why you were brave and courageous.’ But how did I become brave and courageous? Perhaps, it was my habit of constantly learning and my selflessness, that had largely contributed to this. But then, there are many people with a nature similar to mine. However, all of them do not turn out to be brave and courageous, do they? So, did that mean that Kaliya, Keshi and the mad bull were mere instruments sent to increase my strength and courage? If this were so, then rather than being my enemies, they were actually my friends! Viewed from this perspective, no one can ever be considered an enemy. This implies that life is being played out only between two parties—the individual himself and Nature which governs his life. All the other people and things that keep coming and going are mere instruments in one's life. “And if this is true, then whatever is happening is good, all that has transpired was also good and whatever happens in the future will also be good.” Did you see that? Today, my contemplation was ascending to sublime heights. This impudent little mind had become audacious enough to try and understand the mysteries of Nature. Perhaps, this was the consequence of becoming the king,

albeit for a moment! Whatever the reason, the ground reality was that my contemplation and intelligence were not yet so evolved, that I could fully understand or correctly unravel these mysteries of Nature. So, what if I could not do so? Today was the first time, and already I probed very deep with my thinking, tomorrow, the remaining milestones would also be achieved.

My mind had just become calm with these thoughts and I was just about to fall asleep when another question cropped up in my mind and ruined my sleep completely. But I was not able to contemplate on it. Now, I could neither sleep nor could I contemplate! However, it was essential to do one thing or the other; I could not just lie there attempting to sleep without success. So, I thought, why not play my flute? It would be easy to free my mind from thinking by drowning myself in its sweet melody, and it would be entertaining as well. It was a good idea and there was no point in delaying its implementation. I immediately took my flute, and walked towards the garden. After walking for some time, I sat beneath a tree, and began to play the flute. You will not believe, the melodies of the flute that night were so soothing, that I did not even realise when morning softly stepped in. Perhaps, my flute had also become impatient to celebrate my victory. So, its impatience was also taken care of, but what next? Didn't you understand? What I mean is, yesterday's events had exhausted me, and moreover, I had been awake throughout the last night. With nothing else to do, I thought, perhaps I should take a walk. So, I went for a walk, as this seemed to be the best way to drive away the lethargy that set in from not being able to sleep. Upon returning home, I saw that bhaiya had already bathed and was waiting for me in the veranda. The moment I set eyes on him, I remembered that we had to meet grandfather early in the morning. I hurriedly got ready, and we left for the royal palace to meet grandfather. I was in a peculiar state of mind. I had dealt with enemies like Chanoor and Kansa, but this great enemy called 'sleeplessness' did not seem conquerable. Moreover, exhaustion had me in its throes, and I was unable to shake it off.

This was anyway the first day after the death of Kansa. It was also the first time that we were visiting the royal palace. I had been curious to see the palace for a long time, but until now I had kept myself away from it out of fear of my Uncle. The palace was far more magnificent and grand than what I had imagined. The cowherd boy, who until now, had smugly believed that his was the best house in all of Vrindavan, felt his brain go numb on seeing the royal palace. From the exterior, it looked more like a well-built fortress. The interior of the palace was so magnificent that for a moment I was lost in its countless colossal chambers, huge pillars and the beautiful paintings that adorned the walls. I was dazzled seeing the sheer splendour of the palace. Honestly, for a

cowherd boy who had lived all his life in a mud house, in a village, this grand palace was like a dream. Really, there is no comparison between a village house and a palace in a city! City is, after all, a city! Indeed, wealth has its own charm, a palace has its own splendour and a King is truly majestic! Seeing the grandeur of the royal palace, a humorous thought suddenly occurred to me. In jest, it said, 'Oh you fool! By not accepting the royal throne, you have washed your hands off such a wonderful palace. Indeed, had you known this earlier, you probably wouldn't have declined the throne.' Of course, this raillery was merely an attempt at driving off my lethargy. Please do not take this seriously at all.

Well, as expected, the royal palace was engulfed in deep mourning. We were taken straight to grandfather's chamber. As soon as grandfather saw me, he came forward and held me in a warm embrace. I too was overjoyed on seeing him. It was just yesterday that I had met him for the first time, but in spite of the short time we had known each other, we had great affection for each other. We had also begun to share a good rapport and understand each other as well. The relationship between a grandfather and grandson has always been a very special one. That aside, after some polite conversation, grandfather took us directly to the main assembly hall. It was packed to capacity with people. Along with all the nobility of Mathura, my aunts too were already present there. From their red eyes, it was plainly evident that they had not slept the previous night. After all, how can one sleep after having lost one's husband? But surprisingly, in spite of their exhaustion and anguish, they had somehow managed to muster enough strength to glower at me! Indeed, as before, even now, they seemed ready to devour me. Amazingly, their anger seemed to be increasing with the passage of time. I was dumbfounded. Until now, whenever I had seen anger, it was of the kind that dissipated with the passage of time. For example, I had faced bhaiya's anger, father's annoyance, mother's ire and yes, even Radha's rage many a time. But their fury usually dissipated with time. This was the first instance that I was experiencing, where anger was increasing over time. However, even though this was my first such experience, I had realised that if their anger continued to increase at this rate, then it would surely become a problem for me in the not too distant future. Even the Yadava elite did not seem to be inclined in my favour. They certainly could not tolerate my increasing closeness with grandfather. Though I had stayed back in Mathura considering it my duty towards grandfather, and with the intention of scaling the heights of the mind, it did not seem that things would become any easier in the coming days. But for the present, I was sitting right beside my armour, meaning my grandfather. People were still streaming into the assembly hall. Though everybody wore a sorrowful expression, the mourning of my aunts was on a different level altogether. Their

tears and grief-stricken cries refused to abate. Their wailing had troubled me quite a bit after Kansa's death, and even now, I was getting quite vexed by it.

Nevertheless, let me tell you a little about how the situation had changed. Sometime after our arrival, the visiting princes too began to flock in. Seeing them I immediately thought of Rukmini, and instantly, my eyes glanced towards the entrance of the assembly hall, as if they possessed a will of their own and became fixated there. I was so anxious to see her, that my eyes, even though tired, having not slept a wink last night, kept gazing at the entrance without batting an eyelid, in anticipation of Rukmini's arrival at any moment.

Did you see how my mood had taken a turn for the better and brightened up? Once I started thinking of Rukmini, I stopped paying attention to the mourning of my aunts. And because of this change in my mood, the entire scene felt a little bit strange. By this time, about three hundred people were present in this grand and majestic assembly hall. To the right sat all the men, while the left side was occupied by some women including my aunts. Naturally, this group also included Mother Devaki, while Father Vasudeva and Uncle Akrura were sitting with us. Everything was proceeding smoothly so far, but while everyone else was silent, sad and solemn, I was half turned in my seat, craning my neck and continuously looking towards the entrance from where I expected Rukmini to enter. Thankfully, I did not have to wait for long. Otherwise, anyone watching me in this posture would have assumed that I was insane, and would have thought that it was just as well that I had not been crowned the king! Well, what did I care? Lovers are anyway a little mad! What gave me relief was that as soon as she entered, our eyes met, and the moment I locked eyes with her, all my exhaustion drained out of my body. On entering, Rukmini went and sat with my aunts. However, I continued to glance at her surreptitiously. The only difference was, that I was now sitting straight because the princess was sitting right in front of me. At times, her eyes too would glance in my direction. To tell you the truth, this gesture of hers, of repeatedly stealing glances at me was making my heart flutter. Certainly, if the circumstances had been any different, I would probably have lost my composure long back. In fact, to a large extent, I had lost my self-control even now. I had no sense of time or place. I had forgotten everything and was lost in the pleasure of admiring her, and what I was doing was not wrong. But unfortunately, our playful exchange of glances could not continue for long. After some time, Rukmini suddenly got up and went towards the door to leave the room. I became despondent, and even my eyes, filled with melancholy, were gazing only at the departing Rukmini. She left the room even though I was still seated here. It just broke my heart. It seemed as if my life itself was deserting me. It had now become clear to me that I was hopelessly attracted to her. We had

never spoken to each other; nor had we formally met each other. Meaning, I had conjured up this entire scenario in my mind based solely on our eye contact. Interestingly, even though this transgression had been committed by the eyes, it was the heart that was being punished for it. So much so that her arrival made my heart dance with joy and her exit plunged it into gloom. If she looked at me, it would drive me insane and if perchance she ignored me, then it would seem as if there was no life left in me. I was lost in these thoughts when suddenly, I felt as if Rukmini was signalling me to come outside. I went numb. No, no! This was not possible. ‘You are daydreaming Kanhaiya! Will Rukmini ever call you?! And that too in the royal palace and in front of everybody?! Krishna! You have lost your mind! You are of no use anymore. Kanhaiya, you are living in a fool’s paradise. Everything is appearing surreal. It would be better if you come back to your senses and sit here quietly.’ So, I sat there silently. I also averted my gaze from Rukmini.

But alas, this was a restriction forced upon me by reason; my heart obviously refused to listen to it. My insolent gaze once again turned towards Rukmini. It seemed as if she was annoyed that I did not get up to go to her. And at the same time, she was still gesturing for me to come out! There was nothing ambiguous about it anymore. The princess was beckoning the cowherd boy. I was brimming with joy. The gloom was overcome by sheer bliss. I immediately got up and began walking towards her. I did not even make an effort to comprehend what was happening or why it was happening. This cowherd boy was not yet refined enough to understand the behaviour of princesses. The princess had summoned him, and he was not to question or analyse, but merely to obey. I quickly reached the place where Rukmini was waiting for me. And the moment I reached her, she turned and began walking again. My feet followed her of their own accord. Suddenly, she stopped and so did I. The sudden halt brought me back to reality and with that I came back to my senses. On becoming aware of my surroundings, I found myself standing in a secluded corner where nobody would pass by. So, the princess had even found a remote corner for this beautiful meeting! Before I could understand, recover or dance with joy, I found Rukmini looking straight into my eyes with great admiration. It was just yesterday that I had killed three people who were great heroes. But Rukmini’s gaze was enough to floor even a valorous fighter like me. Truly, her style of flooring people was so unique! There were no arrows, no swords, no tricks and no treachery, and yet she had bowled me over in a way I could not even fathom! And while I was squirming under her penetrating gaze, trying my best to appear calm, she posed one direct question that made me swoon. Speaking as if she had a complete right to do so, she asked, “Why did you not accept the crown of

Mathura?”

I never expected such a direct question from someone with such bewitching eyes. Today, my sharp ‘mental calculations’ were of no use to me. My numerous wonderful qualities which I used to flaunt had dissipated into thin air. In fact, I was already only semi-conscious, but upon hearing this startling query, I was rendered completely speechless. My senses simply refused to function. Rukmini’s piercing eyes and imposing gaze were numbing whatever remained of my consciousness. Now you tell me, how could I possibly compose myself against this onslaught? And what could I say to her by way of reply? But realising that it was now or never, I gathered all my wits and reawakened my self-confidence. I thought to myself, ‘If you remain tongue-tied in the first meeting, how will you ever obtain her company for life?’ Truly, Rukmini had completely captivated me in the first meeting itself. Or should I say, I, myself had come under her sway. Whatever the case may have been, at this moment, it was a matter of pride for Kanha, the darling of the gopis. ‘Oh fool! Just yesterday you had learnt the art of maintaining your composure from grandfather. Then why don’t you use it now to maintain your composure? For heaven’s sake, she is just a princess of this earth; not a fairy from heaven!’ I immediately became more confident. I composed myself, calmed my senses and then boldly looking into her eyes, I spoke with full confidence, “Because I do not find the qualities of a king in me.”

On hearing this, Rukmini was flabbergasted. Taking a deep breath, she spoke very solemnly, “Wrong! In my opinion, there are just three essential qualities needed to become a great king. First, he has to be brave enough to be able to protect his throne. Second, he should have the support of the people. And third, he should be concerned about the welfare of the people. And I see all these three qualities in you.”

You must have understood how difficult it must have been for this poor cowherd boy to confidently stand and maintain composure before this imposing Princess of Kundinpur. Speechless, I just stood there listening to what she was saying. Today, I neither had the words to express my feelings nor could I think of a suitable reply. What could I say? I had never heard or been part of such a refined conversation. You already know that I had been deeply smitten by her powerful personality at first sight itself. Later on, I had become enchanted by her innocence. My infatuation with her looks had surpassed all bounds at that time itself. And today, her courage and wisdom were bent on making me her slave. In other words, Kanha’s personality was now fully eclipsed by Rukmini’s charm. And if Kanha himself had been defeated, what else was there to say? However, though I had been vanquished, my vanquisher was still right there standing

before me. So, seeing me standing tongue-tied before her, she took it upon herself to keep the conversation going. And this time, there was an amazing firmness in her voice. Looking straight into my eyes, she said, “Understand this clearly; in my view, your refusal to accept the royal throne of Mathura was not a very wise decision. Perhaps, you do not fully comprehend the fact that not being the son of a king and still getting an opportunity to become one—and that too, in spite of being just an ordinary cowherd boy—is by itself an unprecedented historic event. Perhaps, you may never get such an opportunity to create history ever again. In fact, the agony of not being able to become a king, despite being fully qualified for it could even trouble you for the rest of your life.”

Before I could fully comprehend the meaning of her words, or become enamoured of the manner in which she spoke, her brother Rukmi appeared out of nowhere. Obviously, he glared at me with the nastiest look imaginable, and seething with rage, he took hold of my Rukmini’s arm and dragged her off with him. With Rukmi’s arrival, our beautiful and enlightening meeting ended abruptly. With this incident, Rukmi once again made it amply clear that no matter how much an ordinary cowherd boy’s heart yearned, a princess was still way out of his reach! Truly, Rukmi’s behaviour had shaken me right to the core of my being. Even so, my eyes continued to faithfully follow the departing Rukmini. And as for the princess herself, she was incredible! In spite of all that had happened, she appeared completely calm. And she was such a daredevil, that before getting out of my sight, she even smiled and waved me goodbye! Perhaps, this was the fundamental difference between an uneducated cowherd boy and a well-educated princess. Circumstances held no power to ruffle her feathers! Well, I was not one to be so easily perturbed by them either. It was my heart which had betrayed me, and made me a little weak. So much so that Rukmini had left, but I continued standing right there like an idiot. To tell you the truth, today Krishna too had departed with Rukmini; what stood here was merely his shell of a body. And perhaps the only thing that was left in this shell of a body were thoughts of Rukmini. So, I was now leaning on a pillar, lost in her thoughts. Indeed, everything about Rukmini was unique. How carefree she had seemed when she had signalled to me! Right from the very beginning of our conversation, she had expressed such great confidence in my capability! Moreover, even though she was a princess, she had taken such a keen interest in the bright future of an ordinary cowherd boy! On top of that, even at such a young age, her personality was so mature, so balanced. She had not lost her poise even when Rukmi rudely interrupted us. Indeed, even as she was being pulled away by her angry brother, she had not forgotten to wave to me! Now, I had no idea if she was only interested in my capabilities, or whether she was

interested in me as a person as well. But the condition of my heart was quite unambiguous. It wanted her at any cost. And to fulfill this desire, I made two resolutions as I stood there. One, I had to win Rukmini at any cost. And two, I had to make myself worthy of her. Meaning, even though I had not become a king this time, I must become one for Rukmini's sake in the future.

But would this be enough to enable me to marry her? What if our love had to bear the brunt of her brother's ire? This bothersome future brother-in-law was already annoyed with me! Seeing his behaviour, it was amply clear that he would leave no stone unturned to stop me from becoming his brother-in-law. Just look at the way my imagination had begun to run wild, as if I had already become a king and as if Rukmini had also indicated her interest in getting married to me, thereby compelling me to think of a way of dealing with Rukmi! Such a fool I was! This was like going to the royal palace to haggle over the price of butter even before purchasing a cow! After all, I am a cowherd boy; I will naturally use an analogy that reflects my trade! Suddenly, a voice in my head admonished me, 'Oh dear Krishna! It's okay if you use analogy that any cowherd would, but at least refrain from behaving like one. What is this? Instead of being in the assembly hall, you are standing here like an idiot! Show some maturity and go and sit with others!' So off I went and walked back into the assembly hall, but my mind was elsewhere! Only my body had reached the assembly hall! I was still lost in thoughts of Rukmini! I could not get over the fact that Rukmini had shown faith in my abilities!

It was amazing! Even my own parents, who had raised me, did not show so much faith in me. Even bhaiya, in whose company I spent all day, did not have as much faith in me! Therefore, obviously, the faith that grandfather and Rukmini had shown in me after just a few interactions, was something that astonished me. And as for me, I had firm faith in my abilities ever since childhood. For that matter, when had I ever considered myself ordinary? I had not clashed with Kaliya serpent and Keshi, the demon, just on a whim! I had considered myself to be capable right from childhood, without second thoughts. The question then was, why did only these two show faith in me, and not the others? This meant that if one has to recognise someone else's capability, then one needs to first be capable himself. Well, it was almost afternoon, and people were beginning to leave. In a short while, the assembly hall had emptied completely. As soon as everyone had left, grandfather immediately took us to the dining hall. Ah! What a huge and grand dining hall it was! I was amazed. Although it was not just the dining hall, I had now begun to notice all the opulence all around me. Have you forgotten? It had now become necessary for me to not only just see and appreciate such opulent objects, but also to get them

made. Did you see what I was getting at? Now if you wish to bring a gifted princess home, you have to do all this.

Well, all this will happen in time. For the moment, let me focus on the ravenous hunger which was gnawing at my insides. But we did not need to bother about that either, for we had already entered the huge dining hall and taken our places, the servants had also started serving the dishes; so, the euphoria that Rukmini had given me began to wear off on its own. While waiting for the meal, I looked around the dining chamber. This place could seat about twenty people at a time. Not only was the seat on which we sat, very soft and downy, but there were also luxurious cushions behind us on which we could recline. Moreover, even the small tables in front of us were made of silver, as were the plates from which we were to eat. Along with this, the room was full of paintings, each one more artistic than the other. On this occasion, there were only five people in the room for lunch...me, bhaiya, grandfather, the commander and the Principal Minister. Now I don't know about them, but we cowherd boys were having the time of our lives. But hey! What was this? We, who were craving a *Chhappan Bhog*, were served a plain and ordinary meal! My appetite for a sumptuous meal completely deserted me! Such a grand palace and such an ordinary meal! Perhaps, it was because of grandfather's old age. Or, maybe the palace was mourning the death of Kansa, and therefore we were served this ordinary meal. But whatever the reason, the desire of a cowherd boy to feast on a royal *Chhappan Bhog* remained unfulfilled! Well, we had eaten whatever was available. The treat had ended, and so had the love! Now, I did not feel like staying in the royal palace anymore. I was also beginning to feel sleepy. The momentous deeds of the previous day and my sleepless night were taking a toll on me. I, therefore, sought permission from grandfather to take leave.

Of course, I did not easily get the permission to leave, for he wanted me to stay in the palace itself. I too wanted to stay, but my astute political acumen was saying otherwise, so I humbly declined. The Yadava elite, who were already perturbed by my proximity with grandfather, could cause a lot of unnecessary trouble for him if I stayed back at the palace. To be honest, I was dying to stay in this grand palace. But it was far easier to convince myself not to stay than to try and reason with the stubborn Yadava clan. In short, the choice was between my desire to stay and grandfather's peace of mind. And naturally, grandfather's peace of mind was far more important to me. Even grandfather did not insist too much on my staying. He, of course, was thinking that I was leaving because of my enraged aunts. Thus, this business was settled; but perhaps grandfather and Rukmini had fallen into the habit of constantly springing a surprise on me. I say so because grandfather had presented me with a magnificent chariot while I was

leaving. I was completely overwhelmed by this unexpected gift. My happiness knew no bounds. All in all, this wonderful gift from grandfather captivated my heart completely.

My spirit was soaring on receiving the chariot as a gift, and I was overjoyed on two accounts. On one hand, I was filled with joy on getting the chariot, while on the other, there was the happiness of achieving the first unexpected milestone in my attempt to become worthy of Rukmini. How different was the standard of living in Mathura when compared to Vrindavan! In Vrindavan, when father occasionally brought us a new garment, we used to become so delirious with joy! You might remember that the day when he had presented me with a new flute, I was on cloud nine. But here, in this lavish city of Mathura, a gift meant no less than a magnificent chariot, and that too, a grand and royal one! That is perhaps why it is said that in a big city, everything is larger than life. But I instantly began to show my petty-mindedness. As soon as I saw the chariot, I began daydreaming about Rukmini. Will there ever be a day when she would ride beside me in my chariot? I had just begun to be lost in these sweet dreams, when the charioteer signalled to us to climb aboard the chariot. Well, this was a matter of honour for us, so bhaiya and I promptly climbed in and sat in the back seat of the chariot. To be honest, the manner in which I was sitting was a little too imperious. As soon as we had settled down, the charioteer got the chariot moving and took us straight towards Uncle Akrura's house. Funnily, the moment the chariot gained momentum, thoughts of Rukmini completely disappeared from my mind, and I was fully captivated by the chariot and its magnificence. Did you see how rapidly events were unfolding after our arrival in Mathura? Perhaps, this was the norm in a big city. It felt good, I liked this way of life. I had seen much more of life's highs and lows in my two months stay in Mathura than I had seen in all my eighteen years of life in Vrindavan. Besides, in Vrindavan, I could never have even imagined scaling the peaks of progress that I had scaled soon after my arrival in Mathura.

While I was lost in these thoughts, we reached Uncle Akrura's house. I was really exhausted, so I went off to bed immediately. But to be honest, the chariot standing outside was not allowing me to sleep! With a shiny new chariot standing outside the house, how could the naughty Kanhaiya possibly fall asleep? So, the nap got sidelined, and as soon as evening set in, we took the chariot out into the marketplace. The joy of roaming the marketplace in the chariot was an altogether different experience. It felt as if I was seeing the marketplace of Mathura for the very first time. Oh yes, and on the way back, I had not forgotten to stop by at Malini's place and have a cool drink. How regally I had descended from the chariot and embraced Malini. She too had returned my

embrace with gusto and was elated by her lover's progress, and it was her right to feel so. You might remember that I had met Malini the very first day that I had arrived in Mathura. What a phenomenal difference there was between the Krishna of that day and today! Yesterday's ordinary cowherd boy of Vrindavan had today transformed into Mathura's brave and valorous hero, and the biggest contribution to this transformation was hers alone. And it was because of the valour which I had displayed, that today, everyone in the market was looking at me with respect. Nevertheless, after meeting Malini, I immediately left for home with bhaiya.

Today's trip to the marketplace was a memorable one indeed! Not only had we enjoyed traversing around the marketplace stylishly in a chariot but we had also experienced princely lifestyle. In other words, this cowherd boy had taken his first step towards progress. Later in the evening, after dinner, all of us were seated in the veranda. My eyes were heavy with sleep, but my mind was still stuck on my newly acquired chariot. However, bhaiya had nodded off to sleep after sitting for a while. But the restless soul that I was, how could I sleep? The reason for this was plain and simple; the extreme restlessness was because of the chariot standing outside. Alas, I could not contain myself any longer. I called the charioteer and set off for the banks of the Yamuna. You already know that the River Yamuna was my weakness. But as it was far from the city, I had not been able to go there often from the time I had come to Mathura. But now that we owned a chariot, there was no problem. Truly, I felt a great calm descend on my mind as I sat for some time by the banks of the River Yamuna with my legs dangling in its waters in the darkness of the night. After the last two days of cataclysmic events, my mind anyway needed peace and rest. On the way back home, I even tried my hand at riding the chariot, which I enjoyed thoroughly. After all, if I needed to take Rukmini out for a ride in the chariot, I certainly could not have a charioteer come along! One needs a little privacy when one is in the company of one's beloved.

Nevertheless, upon reaching home, I promptly lay on the bed to sleep. But alas! My infatuation with Rukmini had already robbed me off my sleep, and now, there was also this chariot. They both had become real enemies of my sleep! But today, I needed to sleep. I had been awake for the last two nights and was completely exhausted. And at present, the body was no longer capable of assisting the mind. The mind may well want to fly to a hundred places, but the body functions in its own unique ways. So, somehow, I managed to fall asleep. After a sound sleep, as soon as I woke up refreshed, my intellect took over. The question was, for how long could we stay at Uncle Akrura's place? It was alright to stay until the festival, but now, I didn't know for how long we would have to

stay in Mathura. It was entirely up to my grandfather as to when I would get the opportunity to return to Vrindavan. And staying in the palace seemed an inappropriate choice as far as my personal security and the peace of Mathura were concerned. So definitely, the only viable solution appeared to be father's place. Besides, the reason for not staying with him was now redundant. Kansa was already slain. Well, I had slain him myself. And now that all the events were concluded, there was no need for the cowherd boys to keep hanging around in Mathura either. So, on meeting them that afternoon, I instructed them to return to Vrindavan. This instruction of mine precipitated a new problem. They insisted that we too must go back to Vrindavan with them. But what sort of a request was this? At present, we could not leave Mathura at all. It was imperative for us to stay back in Mathura. Thus, I tried to make them understand by explaining to them the situation in Mathura, and assuring them that we would come back as soon as possible. Most of the other cowherd boys finally gave in, but Uddhava and Sripad simply refused to go without us. It was a strange situation. We were having all these discussions on a road near the royal guest house itself. And the passersby were astonished on seeing us immersed in such a deep discussion. Many of them also greeted me from afar. Now whether I knew them or not, could there be anyone in Mathura who would not recognise the slayer of their king? However, I had a very tough time convincing these cowherd boys. But I finally did succeed, though the problem was still not over. With the intention of teasing me, Uddhava asked, "Do you have any message for Radha?"

Now, what could I say in reply to that? I just kept mum. Why reply and unnecessarily give them new opportunities to stretch the issue? But of course, I also knew this matter would not end here. Once these cowherd boys got into the mood of needling me, they would relent only after putting me in a spot.

And this was exactly what happened too! Now, Sripad got into the mood of pulling my leg. Unnecessarily raising his voice, he asked, "When people ask us in Vrindavan, what all should we reveal?"

I got irritated by this ill-timed question, and in exasperation, I blurted out, "Whatever that has transpired and whatever is going on now. Tell them everything!"

Perhaps Uddhava was waiting for a reply such as this. He promptly asked, tongue in cheek, "So, can we tell everybody of your exploits with Malini?"

I replied, "Yes."

Uddhava then taunted, "Even to Radha?"

That silenced me, and I eventually gave up. Indeed, all I could do was grin in embarrassment. Truly, no other pleasure in life can ever give one the

simple happiness that one derives from bantering with friends. My mind was not at all ready to part with such friends. But parting was the need of the hour, so I had to. In life, things as such do not always happen the way we want them to; one has to convince oneself at times to flow with it, so, I had done just that. The cowherd boys happily departed for Vrindavan after extracting a firm commitment from bhaiya and me that we too would soon return to Vrindavan. But what saddened me was that Mother Yashoda and Nanda also left with them. Well, no matter, but Vasudeva and Devaki were feeling blessed on having us stay with them. To a large extent, the joy on their faces alleviated the sorrow that I felt on parting with Nanda and Yashoda. As father's mansion was quite huge, both bhaiya and I were immediately allotted splendid rooms of our own. These rooms were so magnificent that the rooms in Vrindavan were not even worth comparing to them. The moment I entered the room, I felt as if it belonged to me. But there was one thing that was puzzling me. Despite the love and care we were receiving, I did not know why I could not feel as much affection for Mother Devaki as I felt for Mother Yashoda. Perhaps it was due to the immense love that Mother Yashoda had showered on me for eighteen years as I grew up; my affection for her was more than what I felt for my biological mother.

Presently in Mathura, all the princes who had come for the festival had also departed. The sad part in this development was, that my dear Rukmini had also left with them. Naturally, I was distressed by her departure, but what made it all the more poignant was the fact that we had not been able to meet one last time before she left. Perhaps Rukmi had already taken her back to Kundinpur on the same day that he had dragged her away as we were speaking, so that our 'budding affair' could be nipped in the bud! Didn't he realise that he was soon to be my brother-in-law? Now you tell me, are brother-in-laws supposed to be like this? Because of this brother-in-law, my plight had worsened beyond words. The departure of both, Nanda and Yashoda, as well as Rukmini, had made me depressed. Even though Radha used to frequently quarrel with me, at least she was always nearby. But Rukmini had left for Kundinpur, far away from me. Leave alone Mathura, nothing in the world seemed to interest me anymore. For a couple of days, I moped around silently as I was love-struck. But for how long could I continue to be like this? If the person you are pining for does not care, then why should you suffer so much? In fact, this was also another facet of my personality that I could not remain downcast for long. Fun and laughter were intrinsic to my nature, so how could sadness persist for long? And the best way to get over sadness is to shift the mind's focus onto something else. Unfortunately, the problem was that there was nothing new happening that I could engage my mind in. But I didn't let that stop me. I quietly began applying

my mind to my daily chores, and with that, life quickly slipped into a routine. So, every morning, I went to the palace, then went to meet Malini at the marketplace, learnt to drive the chariot in the evening, had dinner with my parents at night and so on.

Diverting my mind from my sorrows yielded a pleasant result too! Due to the routine I had fallen into, I quickly learnt to ride the chariot. That pleased me very much, and brought happiness back into my life! The chariot now took centre stage in my life instead of Rukmini. I became totally preoccupied with it. Now that I had learnt to manoeuvre the chariot on my own, why did I need a charioteer? I sent him back to the palace. Riding the chariot on my own gave me a joy that was akin to no other. All day long, my chariot could now be seen traversing in style in the streets and by-lanes of Mathura. One day, on a sudden whim, I set off late in the night for the banks of the Yamuna with bhaiya. While returning, racing the chariot on the empty streets of Mathura, was thrilling beyond words! In fact, now that I had learnt to ride the chariot, I began to enjoy my stay in Mathura. But the incorrigible spoilsport that he was, bhaiya had no interest in continuing to stay here for obvious reasons. He had no interest either in politics or in riding around in a chariot; nor did he have a friend like Malini. Though he was not actually complaining, his cheerless demeanour was making it amply evident. At times, when he got really depressed, he would just ask, "What do you reckon? When will we be able to return to Vrindavan?"

I could understand his pain at being away from Vrindavan. The problem, however, could be easily solved, if I could find him something interesting to do here in Mathura. It was essential that bhaiya too got interested in something or the other. Else, he would either drag me back to Vrindavan, or he would make my life miserable in Mathura. Very soon, I found a solution to this problem. We began attending a local wrestling club. As soon as we started doing that, he got involved in wrestling, and he even resumed his practice with the mace. We had already killed Chanoor and Mushtik, the best wrestlers of Mathura. Who else in Mathura could defeat bhaiya in wrestling? Still, he was happy to spend his time defeating the inexperienced wrestlers of Mathura. After he started frequenting this local wrestling ring, within no time, bhaiya's fighting prowess became well known in all of Mathura. Indeed, he had taken to the wrestling ring like a duck takes to water. I was free at last as there was no need for me now to be with him every day. He went on his own to the wrestling ring to show off his might. I too would often go to the wrestling ring accompanied with Malini to cheer him on. Sometimes, egged on by Malini, I too would get into the ring for a couple of bouts with the wrestlers. But bhaiya had become so adept at wrestling, that he would now invariably end up wrestling with four or five wrestlers

simultaneously. Only then did he feel somewhat satisfied. Occasionally, on his insistence, I too would practise with the wrestlers. Bhaiya had taken such a liking to the wrestling ring, that he had almost stopped accompanying me to the palace. In all this, the good news was, he had made friends with two or three sweetshop owners who also frequented the wrestling ring. In short, bhaiya was having a great time, and additionally, he was also getting to feast on mouth-watering delicacies for free! Moreover, his reputation as a wrestler was growing stronger in Mathura.

I continued going to the palace every day without fail. I would also regularly listen to the discussions of the council of ministers. Even grandfather lost no opportunity to encourage my enthusiasm. His constant encouragement was boosting my self-confidence by the day. Gradually, I reached a stage where, if I understood the point under discussion, then I would not even hesitate for a moment before giving my opinion on it. The praise I would receive for my intelligence was the veritable icing on the cake. My spirits would immediately begin to soar. After all, how mature could I have been at my age? Now I do not know if I was really speaking intelligently or if grandfather was saying it merely to encourage me. Regardless of the reason behind his praise, my self-confidence was continually increasing as a result.

One day, the council of ministers was in session when the commander brought everyone's attention to a grave issue. I too began to listen to it attentively. Incidentally, grandfather had got a small throne set up adjacent to his own to grant me importance. The rest of the chamber had arrangements for the seating of the courtiers. The commander informed us that during Kansa's rule, a division of soldiers had been commandeered from the Magadha Kingdom, and later Kansa had permanently inducted them into his army. But now, after the killing of Kansa, the commander was skeptical about their allegiance. So, his main question was whether they should be retained or dismissed. Grandfather too felt that these soldiers of Magadha, who had been completely loyal to Kansa, may no longer be as loyal to the royal palace as before. However, taking the decision in this regard was not as easy as it seemed. For, this would mean antagonising Jarasandha, the King of Magadha; and everyone was scared of making Jarasandha their enemy, especially grandfather. Therefore, his nervousness in this matter was absolutely justified. It was, after all, Jarasandha's power that had not only dethroned him earlier but had also forced him to languish in prison for the past many years. However, when the commander explained the entire situation, we learnt that his anxiety was to do with something far more serious than the mere loyalty of these soldiers. He feared that these soldiers might revolt upon receiving Jarasandha's orders. Even the

Principal Minister agreed with the commander on this issue, but he, in fact, was thinking far ahead of the current situation. Besides the question of loyalty, he was worried about the treasury too. During Kansa's reign, the treasury had been almost depleted. The primary reason for this was the fact that Kansa had never paid much attention to it. The Principal Minister contended that, "Considering the alarmingly depleted state of the royal treasury, it was not possible for Mathura to continue carrying the burden of paying salaries to these additional soldiers from Magadha."

Now since the matter was serious and had numerous implications to it, there followed a long session of deliberations. I found both the problem and the discussions quite interesting and I began listening to the discussions very attentively. I kept committing to memory all the opinions expressed both for and against the issue. Simultaneously, I had also begun to process all the information in my brain to tackle this problem. This was the first time I was hearing such an intelligent discussion, and honestly speaking, it felt very strange at first. When someone presented a strong argument to make his point, I would find myself fully supporting him. But then again, when someone else presented an equally strong case against it, I would find myself being swayed by it as well. However, this did not continue for too long. Gradually, I began to catch the subtle nuances of the arguments. You may find it hard to believe, but in just a short while after listening to the discussions, I had even formed a firm opinion on this issue. But I did not venture any suggestion for fear of making a fool of myself.

Towards the end of the discussions, an astonishing thing happened. When all arguments for and against were tabled and discussed threadbare, and when grandfather was just about to proclaim his decision, he paused and asked me if I had any opinion on the matter. A thousand thoughts rapidly coursed through my mind. One loud and persistent voice pleaded, 'Kanhaiya, for heaven's sake, do not open your big mouth; if you do, you will make an absolute fool of yourself!' Another voice emphatically advised, 'Do not be a fool! Why waste such a golden opportunity to showcase your wisdom?' I felt badly trapped between these two voices; heeding one first and then discarding it for the other. Earlier, it was the arguments and counter-arguments during the discussions that had made me agree with one or the other opinion. And now, my own mind was contriving to make me vacillate between two extremes. Seeing me in a dilemma, grandfather tried to encourage me. He said, "Give us your opinion without fear, Kanhaiya. Not only I but the whole court wants to hear your opinion."

I was already brimming with enthusiasm and self-confidence and grandfather's encouragement tipped the scales. So, I instantly stood up and began expressing my views with full confidence. I said, "According to me, the depleted condition of Mathura's royal treasury, and the question mark over the loyalty of the Magadha division, is cause enough to dismiss this division. And as far as Jarasandha is concerned, he has never been our king's friend. Mathura can perhaps deal with Jarasandha alone, but if the Magadha division within our army revolts, we will end up paying a heavy price for it. History has shown us that it is always difficult to deal with traitors who hide amongst us. The proof of this is in history where even a powerful king like Ravana was defeated, primarily because his very own brother Vibhishana had betrayed him. Another fact that needs to be carefully considered is that Kansa, during his rule, had given too much importance and preferential treatment to the Magadha division. The local Mathura divisions must have certainly resented this, and naturally, they must have been compelled to suppress this resentment during Kansa's reign. But now that Kansa is no more, not only can there be an outpouring of this resentment, but their dormant hopes may also revive. And, if that happens, then the army would unnecessarily be split into two. Needless to add, a divided army is like having no army at all. All these stated reasons are clearly pointing to the removal of the Magadha division as the only solution." Saying this much, I sat down. I did not expect any reaction, but you will not believe that my opinion drew quite an applause. Not only did everyone praise me, but the Magadha division was also dismissed with immediate effect. As for me, with this one significant input, I not only became my grandfather's favourite, but also established myself as a wise person in the eyes of the council of ministers.

Just as I had hoped, the removal of the Magadha division had a positive impact on Mathura's soldiers. Indeed, they celebrated this decision with great fanfare. With the dismissal of the Magadha division, the people of Mathura too began to trust the royal palace. After many years, the common people began to feel that the royal palace had their best interests at heart. The reason they felt this way was clear; during Kansa's rule, all the atrocities on the people of Mathura were committed by these very soldiers of Magadha, so when they were dismissed, naturally, the people of Mathura began to regard the royal palace as their well-wisher. Everyone began to praise King Ugrasena, and I, his grandson was not far behind in receiving my share of praise. On one hand, I was becoming famous in Mathura, and on the other, tales of my heroic deeds were spreading afar, across the whole Aryavarta belt. Earlier too, while I was in Vrindavan, I had already gained some recognition when I put a stop to the practice of *Indrapuja*, and now with the slaying of Kansa, I had gained even more fame. A small boy

had killed Kansa; this was big news in itself. It is worth mentioning that there were only a few mighty kings or great *Acharyas* who were well-known and reputed throughout Aryavarta. I, Krishna was the only exception in this list of Aryavarta's famous and illustrious personalities. Neither was I a king nor a prince, neither a minister nor a commander in the army, neither an *Acharya* nor a great artist. Even so, today I was no less famous than any of these great personalities. This is why I say, where a person is born or under what circumstances he is raised does not hold any significance. What is important is how much he learns from these circumstances.

Nevertheless, I continued with my daily schedule. There was nothing else to be done in Mathura except going daily to the court, having meals with my parents, meeting Malini and riding my chariot. Well, speaking of the chariot, I just remembered that there was one positive change in me. I had now become an expert charioteer. Pulled by two beautiful, strong, white horses, my chariot was now completely under my control. Pulling the racing chariot to a sudden halt or turning the chariot at high speed was now child's play for me.

Speaking of the changes I was undergoing, a great opportunity for change soon came knocking at my door. And surprisingly, bhaiya was instrumental in bringing this opportunity to me. One night, I had gone out with him for a ride around Mathura. On a sudden whim, he said, "Kanhaiya! This sweetmeat business is a profitable one. Why don't we also start one?" I liked the idea as soon as I heard it. I also wanted to progress in life, and you already know that the reason behind it was Rukmini alone. So, as soon as bhaiya put forth his idea, I drifted off into a reverie—Kanhaiya, the rich owner, sitting at his shop selling sweets! But dreams, after all, are only dreams! Reality is quite harsh. After the initial discussions, I realised that we did not have enough money to set up a shop. All things considered, even though the idea had merit, we lacked the means to turn it into reality. This setback made me realise that it was not easy for poor cowherds to progress in life. It did not affect me much, but it saddened bhaiya. You are well aware that I could face any difficulty, but I could not bear to see bhaiya unhappy. As a result, I too plunged into an abyss of sadness upon seeing his state. At this point, however, time took a turn and proved that the winds of change were sweeping around us. For soon after our setback, grandfather noticed that I was sad. When he enquired after the reason for my sadness, I explained the entire matter to him. As soon as he heard the reason, he let out a laugh, and then stroking my head reassuringly said, "Is that all?!"

Before I could understand what he meant, he immediately arranged for a hundred cows to be given to us from the cowshed of the royal palace for a nominal annual tax. So, now we were back in business. As soon as I gave this

news to bhaiya, he became elated! There was no stopping him now. He sat down to list the delicacies he would sell at the shop. He was so excited that he couldn't think of anything else to discuss. Generally, bhaiya had a calm temperament; it was not in his nature to display such enthusiasm. But today his enthusiasm even surpassed my own. The blueprint of the business was prepared overnight. The very next day, we first recruited a few cowherd boys who would take the cows for grazing. Now that we were businessmen, we could no longer take the cows out for grazing, could we? When father came to know of our plans, he too gave us some money from his own savings to help us out and encourage us. With that money, we soon made a cowshed for the cows. Being cowherds ourselves, we were naturally used to working hard; thus, there was no question of us shirking hard work. Brimming with enthusiasm, bhaiya and I toiled all day and night. Soon, we were ready to set up the business, and in just two months, we not only purchased a shop in the marketplace but also stocked it and began our own sweetshop. All kinds of delicious sweets made from milk, curd, butter and sugar-candy were available at our shop. The business continued to thrive with the passage of time. Along with our business, our efforts and dedication to our work also kept on increasing. Within a short span of time, we had shops in all the three main marketplaces in Mathura. Bhaiya was the one who managed all the three shops. It was amusing to see bhaiya sit so pompously in the shop, as if he was the wealthiest, most eminent businessman in all of Mathura! Meanwhile, our burgeoning prosperity only fuelled the resentment of the Yadava elite, who were already angry with us for no apparent reason. They were of the opinion that we were eating into their businesses. Admittedly, this may have been true as our new shops had more customers than their old and renowned ones. For whatever reason, whether it was the way we interacted with our customers or the freshness and quality of our sweets, or even if it was the influence of the royalty; the fact was that our enterprise was definitely flourishing, and with the help of this flourishing business, we both led our lives peacefully in Mathura.

Chapter 2

First Fight With Jarasandha

I could not understand if it was Mathura that was gradually growing on us, or if it was we, who were embracing it in earnest, but the end result was, we had now become true *Mathurawasis*—just like the other inhabitants of Mathura. We were enjoying every day of our stay in Mathura, when all of a sudden, even more joy came cascading into our lives. As was my daily routine, that day too, I was sitting in our shop in the main marketplace, when father's aide came in search of me. On finding me at the shop, he conveyed the news to me that Mother Yashoda and Father Nanda had arrived in Mathura. Usually, Father Nanda did visit Mathura every year to pay Vrindavan's annual taxes, but this year, he had brought Mother Yashoda along as well. Perhaps, the fact that mother was missing her darling son in Vrindavan must have forced father to bring her along and spring this pleasant surprise upon us. As soon as I heard the news, I jumped down from the veranda of the shop, and raced towards our house, all the time wondering how my poor Mother must have spent all these days without me. I, on the other hand, was as uncaring as ever; I had become so engrossed in my activities in Mathura, that I had not even bothered to find out how she was. But what could I do? The circumstances did not allow me to do anything else; I was preoccupied with so many things! But for the moment, all those difficulties had become immaterial. From the moment I heard that Mother

had arrived, I started thinking about her. I even began to converse with her in my mind. As you already know, my relationship with Yashoda was such, that it was obvious for me to be delirious with happiness at the mere news of her arrival. To be honest, I had never felt so happy after my arrival in Mathura. For me, there was no greater joy than the fact that I was about to meet my mother. Obviously, they were staying with Vasudeva, as they had no other relations in Mathura. And besides, they were bound to put up where Krishna, their darling son was staying.

As I reached home, I saw Mother Yashoda seated on the swing, awaiting my arrival. Nanda was also sitting right beside her, and Devaki and Vasudeva were also seated close by. As soon as I entered the house, I immediately touched my parents' feet in respect, and mother promptly embraced me, her brave son! And before we could realise it, we were both swept away in a tide of emotions. By sundown, bhaiya too returned, and the conversation which began thereafter continued till the wee hours. We had so much fun that night, that from then onwards, this became our daily routine. Indeed, Mother Yashoda had brought my entire childhood along with her. Every day, she would open this trunk full of memories of Vrindavan, and I would hopelessly get lost in those golden memories... Vrindavan's soft, earthen by-lanes, the sparkling waters of the River Yamuna, the beautiful lakes, the mighty Govardhana Hill, the gopis and... Radha! Life was so magical then! Whatever a person needed to live a good life was available there in its pristine form. If I were to compare Vrindavan with Mathura, then Mathura was undoubtedly a bigger city. Here, I had promising business opportunities, a more spacious house, a certain degree of eminence in the royal palace, and now I also had my own chariot. At the same time, seen from a socio-economic perspective, this city was full of abundant possibilities for people to carve a bright future for themselves. If I stop comparing and talk about my preference, then Kanha liked both these places as each had its own unique features. What one had, the other city could not offer and vice versa. They represented two radically diverse ways of life. I was lost in these thoughts when my contemplation took me in an altogether new direction. I began to think...I was born in Mathura, but it was not really my decision that I was taken to Vrindavan. It was due to the circumstances that prevailed at that time. Similarly, coming back to Mathura from Vrindavan was not my decision either. It was my Uncle's sudden outpouring of affection that had brought me here! It was also not my decision to stay back in Mathura. Grandfather's wish and Mathura's welfare had held me back in Mathura. And when it was always circumstances that had decided where I would stay, then why was I comparing Mathura and Vrindavan, especially when I liked both places equally? But it was not I who had initiated this line of thinking; it was Mother Yashoda. Right from

the day she had arrived in Mathura, she had been glorifying Vrindavan and I, a poor young boy, began reminiscing about the bygone days. Life in Vrindavan had been so peaceful, pleasurable and full of love. And life in Mathura was so hard, dry, lonesome and full of struggles! Vrindavan was filled with such simple and affectionate people whereas the streets of Mathura were filled with such egotistic, selfish and manipulative people! See how quickly mother's arrival here had changed my perspective! Now the balance had tipped in Vrindavan's favour. Well, no, it was not that; actually, I had got swayed by emotions. I was not overly concerned about which city I was in. I have already told you that it was not my choice. Both Vrindavan and Mathura held their own significance in my mind. I had just compared both, just for the sake of it. But what could I do about this reverie of mine which continued to flow endlessly? If I diverted it from one aspect, it promptly latched onto another. And ever since mother's arrival, this had become a routine every night. I would go to bed only after hearing about Vrindavan from mother, and thereafter, I would begin reminiscing about Vrindavan, and would be unable to sleep. One day, something quite surprising happened. I was in deep thought, contemplating over Vrindavan and Mathura, when a question cropped up in my mind, 'Is it not possible for love and progress to co-exist? Why can't it be possible? I will prove it through the way I live my life that it is possible for both love and progress to co-exist! For, I myself cannot live without either of these. I liked both Vrindavan's love-filled, peaceful way of life as well as Mathura's progressive, fast-paced life. Obviously, since I liked both, I wanted both. Why should I unnecessarily endure the pain of the lack of love or progress in my life? Though this was just a passing thought, it was indeed very positive. And the pleasant outcome of this was, that night, sleep followed close on the heels of this positive thought.

After Mother Yashoda's arrival in Mathura, I began to enjoy all my meals at Father Vasudeva's place. Hence, I was able to enjoy tales from mother's magical treasure trove of memories, and would also get the opportunity to sit in the garden every night, chatting for hours. Mother Yashoda would bring to life the golden memories of Vrindavan, and I would promptly lose myself in the feelings that these memories evoked. Ever since mother had arrived, this had become our daily routine. It appeared as if mother's memories had spirited me away to Vrindavan. Mother Devaki and Yashoda would daily seat themselves on the swing, while Nanda and Vasudeva seated close by would invariably become absorbed in their own conversation. Bhaiya and I would sit on the ground in front of the swing, lost for hours together in Mother Yashoda's stories. Truly, only the one who has spent his childhood giving vent to his childlike tendencies can turn out to be a well-bred youth. A youth wants to progress in life whereas a

child merely wants to play. Consequently, only the one who has revelled in the innocent joys of childhood to his heart's content, can walk on the path to progress in his youth. Perhaps, this was the secret behind my rapid success after coming to Mathura. I can state with conviction that the child who has spent his childhood in seriousness can never be a promising youth. And needless to add, if one fails to become a good youth, how can he become a good person in his old age?

On this visit, Mother Yashoda stayed in Mathura for seven days. The wonderful thing about her stay was, that while she spent these seven days in Mathura, I had spent the same time in Vrindavan! Due to this, life in Mathura began to feel listless and dull. Indeed, there were no festivals or celebrations in Mathura. All it had, was the humdrum routine, day after day. But thanks to mother, before leaving Mathura, she had at least etched the golden memories of Vrindavan in my mind forever. She had evoked vivid memories of Vrindavan and that too in such great detail that those memories never faded throughout my life. I was eternally grateful to her for this, but there was more. In all these days, that angel had not even once asked, "Son, when are you returning to Vrindavan?" As always, to her, even today, the happiness of her son held utmost importance. It did not matter to her whether I stayed in Vrindavan or in Mathura, whether I stayed with her or afar, she had ensconced me in her heart in such a manner, that I would never ever be far from her at any time. What a wonderful mother she was! In fact, it was I who was so fortunate to have been raised for the past eighteen years by someone who was the very personification of a mother's love. To see me smiling, she had forsaken the memory of her own daughter who was sacrificed to save me; where on earth would anyone find such a doting mother? To tell you the truth, every single day that mother stayed with me in Mathura, I felt tempted to accompany her on her return to Vrindavan. But that was not possible as I had my new business to take care of and grandfather would certainly not allow me to leave either. Then I thought to myself that Vrindavan was just a day's journey from Mathura, I could go there whenever I wanted to. And now since I even had a chariot of my own, it would just take half a day to reach Vrindavan if I rode the chariot at a rapid pace.

All these fleeting thoughts came to my mind, solely because I was feeling depressed and homesick ever since mother had left. Nothing else seemed to interest me anymore. I had bid mother farewell with a smile, but later, I sat on the banks of the River Yamuna all day and passed the time listlessly throwing stones into the water. The sun had set, but I was still unable to find solace in anything, and it was from this point that the real problem began. I had managed to spend the day somehow but what about the night? For the past seven days, I

had become accustomed to sitting with Mother Yashoda, listening to her numerous stories of Vrindavan but now, that was not possible as she was not in Mathura. Merely thinking of this made me terribly restless, and in anger, I hurled one last stone into the water. But all this was not going to bring my mother back. So, with a heavy heart, I headed towards home. However, my condition deteriorated further on reaching home. My appetite deserted me and I did not feel like eating anything. Momentarily frustrated, I muttered to myself that it would have been better had I gone to Vrindavan with my mother.

I was in a strange situation. I could not fall asleep despite my efforts, so I remained awake and started recalling Mother Yashoda's tales. The moment I closed my eyes, pictures of a vibrant Vrindavan would begin to dance before my eyes. Well, I thought there was plenty of time to rest, so why not heed the wishes of my heart? Mother was not here with me, but at least I still had fond memories of her! How happy both my mothers had been when I took them in my chariot on a sightseeing tour around Mathura! How could I forget how proud and delighted Mother Yashoda had been on seeing my sweet shop? How content she was when I fed her delicacies with my own hands from my shop! After all, I too used to experience great satisfaction, when mother would feed me with her own hands! I silently asked her in my mind, 'Dear mother, why did you leave?' Another voice in my mind shot back, 'If you miss your mother so much, why didn't you go back with her?' It was a good question, for mother had at least come to see me because she missed me. But I had done nothing of that sort; in fact, I did not even think about Vrindavan until now. Oh! What do I tell you, after mother left, I became completely engrossed in thoughts of Vrindavan. Despite wanting to, I could not snap out of its lure. Previously, there had been several occasions, when I had remained absorbed in the thoughts of Radha; and these days, my mind was obsessing over Rukmini. But being obsessed with Vrindavan was an altogether different experience. This was because Vrindavan constituted everything. Perhaps that was the reason why I had not felt as much pain when I parted with Radha or Rukmini, as I was now feeling on staying afar from my dear Vrindavan. And why would I not become restless at the very thought of it? How could I forget our cavorting on the banks of the River Yamuna, and around the Govardhana Hill? How could I not remember my friends, the gopas and gopis? How could I stay without the love of my dear parents? And how could I ever live without my sweet Radha?

Ah! The moment her name came to my mind, I got engrossed in thinking about her! 'Truly, when I visit Vrindavan, for the first few days Radha will not even speak to me in sheer anger. But for how long would she be able to do that? As soon as I seat her on my chariot and take her to Govardhana, her anger will

be washed away in the Yamuna! And the gopis! They will instantly start fighting among themselves to be the first to sit on the chariot; indeed, they might even come to blows over it! Radha's sweet anger, the gopis' quarrelling... it will be so much fun to watch all that!' All these thoughts flitted through my mind. Did you see, without even going to Vrindavan, I was deriving joy from it, just like I was experiencing the joy of living with Rukmini, even when she was not present with me. This was the secret of my perennial happiness. I had never given any importance to physical meeting or separation. To tell you the truth, I never believed in meeting or parting. For me, remembering someone or thinking about that person was just as satisfying as physically being with that person. For, I firmly believed that if true love dwells in the heart, it is enough. Besides, meeting and parting depend on the other person's will and his innumerable circumstances and reasons—apart from one's own. But to weave dreams, one's own desire is enough. As a matter of fact, for true love, it is enough to just have a pure heart. Dreaming has another wonderful feature; if your desires are pure and you are determined, you can instantly start living the dream, just like I was currently living mine. My heart was in Vrindavan, my mind was with Rukmini even though I was still here...in Mathura! But this did not mean that I was unhappy here. No, Mathura had its own engagements, its own life and pleasures. So, let me make it clear, that all the while I carried out my tasks in Mathura, I could not help but be completely absorbed in my work. And as for my memories and dreams of what I yearned for, I already had my flute. Radha's love had woven such magic in its notes that on the wings of the melody, I could soar and reach wherever and whenever I pleased. Whenever I missed Vrindavan or Radha, I would begin playing the flute and the magical winged melody would immediately transport me to Vrindavan. Similarly, whenever thoughts of Rukmini made me restless, I would take flight on the winged melodies of the flute and soar to the sky with her. This was the reason why, despite being a long way off from Radha and Rukmini, I had never really parted from them. I would often meet them both through the winged melodies of my flute. As long as I had a pure heart and my dear flute, how could I be parted from Radha or Rukmini, or anyone else for that matter? What I mean here is that there was no place for dissatisfaction in my life. I understood the harsh realities of life and accepted them as I went along. Rather than insisting on changing the circumstances, I moulded myself to suit them and remained happy. This was the secret of my ever-present smile. I had found within myself self-sustaining happiness which no circumstance, person or time could snatch away from me. I spent the night with these thoughts and memories on my mind, and soon, the misty morning dawned. It was only then that the progression of thoughts ceased, and no sooner had they

stopped than I fell asleep. Meaning, everything had turned upside down soon after mother had left. All night, when I was supposed to sleep, I stayed awake and dozed as soon as the sun rose!

I had just fallen asleep when royal messengers arrived with a summons from grandfather to come to the palace. This was the first time he had summoned me so early in the morning. This meant that it was definitely a matter of great importance. The moment this thought struck me, my drowsiness vanished, and I began to speculate on the reasons for this meeting. This untimely summons from grandfather had instantly brought my wandering mind back from Vrindavan to Mathura once again. I quickly got ready and rushed towards the royal palace, wondering why I had been summoned. It did not take me much time to reach the palace in a chariot. Well, though I reached the palace quickly, the reason for the summons still remained a mystery. The scene that greeted me at the royal palace was totally unexpected. The royal court was packed to capacity. Grandfather was seated on his throne, and the council of ministers had already taken their seats. But surprisingly, there were also several visitors who appeared to be from another region. They were seated on the floor in front of the ministers, facing the king. This was quite unprecedented for me! I had never witnessed such a scene at the palace before. There was another thing that surprised me. Along with the visitors, the entire Yadava elite were also seated in their places, and much to my surprise, they all appeared furious. In short, the matter was completely beyond my comprehension. Well, my understanding of the proceedings of the royal court was anyway limited. It was only recently that I had begun visiting the royal palace. What did I know about politics or royal affairs? I was behaving and being treated like an important person just for namesake. To me, the royal palace was akin to a *gurukul*—a place of learning—where there was something new to learn every day. And like a good student, I too was always eager to learn something new. But the present scenario was completely beyond my comprehension. Lost in these thoughts, I took the seat reserved for me beside my grandfather. As soon as I was seated, grandfather advised the Principal Minister to start the proceedings. From this, I gathered that they were all waiting only for me. Indeed, grandfather had accorded me great respect. To tell you the truth, whatever little prominence I enjoyed at the royal palace could be attributed solely to his love and cooperation. My capability certainly had no role to play in it. That day, I made a commitment that I would make myself worthy of my grandfather's love.

Even as I was thinking about all this, the Principal Minister, stood up on grandfather's instructions, and began to brief everyone in the court about the matter at hand. He informed us that "Earlier, these outsiders were inhabitants of

Mathura. They were all affluent and respectable residents. But fearing persecution and harassment at the hands of Kansa, they had fled from Mathura along with their families. Now that Kansa is dead and the situation has improved, these people have returned to Mathura along with their families to resettle here. We do not have any objection in granting them refuge, but the main issue is, that these people also want their lands and shops, which they were forced to abandon out of helplessness, to be returned to them. These properties were appropriated by Kansa at that time and are now part of the royal treasury. Besides, the local Yadava elite too are strongly against returning anything to them. They feel that doing so might compromise their existing business. More significantly, even the ministers are divided in their opinion over this matter. Thus, today this meeting has been called to take everyone's views and hold a collective discussion on the issue. The palace has held discussions with all the affected parties, and I have also clarified everyone's views on the matter." Saying this, the Principal Minister took his seat. After a few minutes of discussion, it became clearly evident that the Yadava elite were still reluctant to agree to any proposal to let the palace return anything to these Yadavas who had come back. On the other hand, the council too was unable to take a decision on how to get both parties to reach a consensus, as the royal palace did not want to displease either of the parties. Not only had I heard the Principal Minister's words attentively, but I had also grasped the essence of all that was being discussed. When the solution remained elusive even after a long-drawn-out discussion, grandfather turned to me and asked for my opinion. Well, this was the highest honour he could have accorded me. Indeed, grandfather never lost a single opportunity to accord me respect or increase my stature in the eyes of the courtiers. So now it was my duty to live up to his expectations and honour the respect that grandfather had given me. I had already become an expert at evaluating and assessing the circumstances. Moreover, it is also a well-known fact, that if a situation is analysed carefully, the most appropriate solution can be easily arrived at. And, I had by now comprehended the issue clearly. Actually, it was a simple matter, and what was needed now, was the correct analysis of the situation. I had done that accurately on several different occasions in Gokula and Vrindavan. Here too, as before, I became absorbed in contemplation. No sooner had I started contemplating than the entire court fixed their eyes on me. Many of them were laughing in their heart of hearts, wondering how a cowherd boy like me could contemplate and find a solution. Well, they would soon come to know; you may not believe it, but after deep contemplation that lasted just a short while, I had reached the very root of the problem. In fact, all the solutions in this world lie hidden at the root of the problem. The situation became clear to me,

and according to that, the decision would affect three main parties; firstly, the royal palace, secondly, the outsiders and thirdly, the local Yadavas. Therefore, the solution had to be in the interests of all three, and only then could this matter be resolved. There were indications that unless this was done, the arguments would continue. The solution that I had found was clear in my mind, but how could I bring myself to suggest something so big? I was in a dilemma whether to offer my suggestion or keep quiet. In Vrindavan, it was easy to advise people and make plans for them. But this was the royal court of Mathura, it was packed with seasoned experts and highly experienced people. I thought, 'What if I lose whatever respect I had been able to gain till now? What if my solution proves to be childish?' But then another thought crossed my mind, 'Well, so what? After all, I was still a child, and besides, none of these wise men had been able to think of a way to resolve this issue. So, if in case, my solution also proved to be impractical, it was not as if the sky would collapse on my head. Moreover, as grandfather had shown such faith in me, I have to respect his wishes and say something at least. More significantly, I did not see any problem with the solution that I was about to propose. Then why should I hesitate and lose the opportunity of impressing those present in the court?'

While I had been given time to think over what I was going to say, the discussions continued among the people assembled at the court. The Yadava elite still appeared quite agitated. It was clear that they were in no mood to tolerate any attack on their business interests. A little later, even I was ready, so I rose from my seat and asked grandfather for permission to speak. Even while doing so, I once again glanced at the packed court; there were around two hundred people assembled in the court. Around fifty of these were 'the outsiders' who were sitting on the floor in front of me. The rest included the local Yadava elite and the guards and soldiers, besides, of course, the entire council of ministers. What was significant was that the majority of the people gathered were between fifty to seventy years of age! For a young boy like me who was only nineteen years old to rise up from his seat and express his opinion to this mature gathering was a test of self-confidence. But I was an epitome of self-confidence; so, on receiving grandfather's permission, I rose confidently to suggest my solution to the problem and said, "It is an accepted fact that Kansa's reign was a very difficult time for Mathura. Indeed, these Yadava families were not safe here at that time. But because they were wealthy, these people were able to leave Mathura in search of a safe haven. The point to be noted here is that not all affluent Yadavas had left Mathura. Clearly, those who abandoned Mathura in her difficult hour, and have suddenly remembered their homeland only after the situation has improved, cannot be termed as loyal citizens of Mathura! But on

the other hand, Mathura is a big kingdom. And a big kingdom should have a big heart. So, neither can Mathura reject these people nor can it welcome them with open arms. Indeed, after staying in foreign lands, these people too must have realised that the respect and regard that one gets in one's own land can never be gained in foreign lands. That being the case, if we return all their land and shops to them, it would be grossly unfair to those prominent Yadavas, who chose to remain with Mathura in her hour of difficulty. On the other hand, if we take a hard stance on this matter and do not return their land, this will be callous behaviour on the part of Mathura towards its own children. Therefore, I am of the opinion, that we should return half their land but their trade tax should be doubled, so that the business interests of the local residents of Mathura remain unaffected by their arrival. Now whatever the court decides would be the final decision."

Saying thus, I sat down. I was astounded by my own analysis and lucid statement. Indeed, in my proposal, I had taken the welfare of all three parties into consideration. On one hand, by agreeing to return half the land, I was giving the returning Yadavas the honour of becoming citizens of Mathura once again, while on the other, the royal palace was earning double the annual tax and getting half their lands. As for the local Yadavas, their present businesses had been protected by deciding to double the tax on the returning Yadavas. All in all, my analysis and solution was so perfect, that not only the entire council of ministers but even the local elite as well as those who had returned were all completely satisfied. Indeed, it was a well thought out and a comprehensive solution. I had already demonstrated my wisdom before when I had made the suggestion on the issue related to the Magadha soldiers. But the matter this time was far more complex. I could clearly see that with this suggestion of mine, I had really impressed the royal court of Mathura with my wisdom. Grandfather, in fact, was so pleased, that setting aside court protocol, he embraced me warmly. The assembled Yadava elite, the citizens of Mathura who had returned as well as the local Yadavas were astonished to see this display of affection. As for the council of ministers, they were completely charmed by me! To tell you the truth, in my heart, I was unable to handle so much adulation, and the proof of this was that I was suffused with pride. While on one hand, I deserved to feel proud at this moment, on the other, it was also a sign of my immaturity. Whatever it was, the fact was that my suggestion was accepted in its entirety. And truly, I felt very proud of myself.

Well, I was enjoying myself in Mathura in the days that ensued. Along with my growing wisdom, my business was also expanding with time. And what gave me greater pleasure was the fact that these days, I did not have to bear the

angry glances of my aunts. Actually, they had gone to stay in Magadha with their father Jarasandha for some time now. As their husband Kansa was no more, perhaps they found it depressing to stay on in Mathura with nothing to engage themselves in. Good! As long as the aunts were happy, the nephew too was at peace. Then one day, to my great surprise, Uddhava arrived to meet me. My happiness knew no bounds when I saw him. But hey! What was this? For some reason, he did not seem too pleased to see me. On the contrary, he appeared very sad; in fact, I felt he was also angry with me. I could more or less understand his anger, which could be because I had not returned to Vrindavan; but the reason for his sadness was beyond my comprehension. Nevertheless, placating him was not so difficult. After all, Uddhava was not Radha who was difficult to placate! 'I will soon find out what the matter is.' With this thought and in order to pacify him, I very lovingly asked, how everything in Vrindavan was. But the way he reacted was contrary to what I had expected, as if he was just waiting for such an opportunity.

The moment he heard my question, Uddhava unleashed his fury on me and very sardonically, retorted with a counter query, "Oh, do you still remember Vrindavan?" Needless to mention, from this one remark, I could easily gauge his state of mind. Well, well! Vrindavan seemed to have progressed in my absence! Friends these days were coming from afar not to meet me, but to express their indignation! But no matter; I was willing to endure it all without reacting to it, so I kept my silence. Because I was sure to get curt and stinging retorts to anything I said at this time. Cunning that I was, I gave up my efforts to glean information about Vrindavan for the time being. Instead, I opted for other means to slowly pacify him over a period of time. First of all, I took him for a walk around the bustling marketplace. Then in the evening, I took him on a sightseeing tour of Mathura city in my chariot. However, there was still hardly any conversation between us. Well, I did not want to talk either; I was merely interested in calming him down. And I could see that his anger was indeed subsiding gradually. After all, for how long could anyone remain annoyed with Krishna? By late evening, after having our dinner, Uddhava had calmed down considerably. After all, it was precisely with this objective that I had fed him the *Chhappan Bhog*!

That night after dinner, I took him out for a stroll. However, I still could not muster the courage to have a long chat with him. On returning home, we both sat outside on the swing and began rocking it to and fro. I had lit a torch so that I could clearly see his expressions and gauge the extent of his anger. Both of us were silent, but it seemed that Uddhava, in his current mood, was now ready to speak. Thus, taking this opportunity, I once again asked him the same question

for which I had been snubbed in the morning. I asked, “Is everything alright in Vrindavan?” On hearing the same question once again, Uddhava became very morose, and in that same dreary tone he replied, “How on earth would it be alright? Vrindavan has become desolate without you. The gopis have forgotten how to laugh. They are no longer interested in doing anything. As for the elders at Vrindavan, all they do is stare vacantly into the horizon, miserably waiting to see you return. Believe me Kanhaiya, they are still alive only because they hope to see you once again. These simple-minded elders are waiting to bless you for your great accomplishments. Before dying, these poor elders want to see the difference between the lovable Kanha and the mighty Krishna! Even the gopas have stopped playing and cavorting around the countryside. Where is the fun in playing when Kanhaiya is not around? The water of the Yamuna has all but stopped flowing. Now, in your absence, neither do the waters of Yamuna cool us down nor does it wash away our exhaustion and refresh us. Govardhana too has become completely barren. The flower and fruit-bearing trees all around Vrindavan are so dejected that they have even forgotten how to bloom. In short, everyone in Vrindavan, especially the gopis, have sent me here to bring you back.”

I was thrilled and was smiling inwardly, as I listened to Uddhava’s long list of complaints. To tell you the truth, I was feeling a little tickled by his outburst and wanted to laugh out loud. But my laughter at this moment could have endangered the current situation. If Uddhava, who had just been calmed down with great difficulty, became enraged again, it could spell great trouble for me. It was in my interest to merely empathise with him. His description was very vivid and exaggerated! This was the intriguing thing about love. The dreams of the lover, his words, his pain, everything is very poetic, always far removed from reality! But the beauty of such musings is, that in spite of being devoid of any factual information, they directly appeal to one’s heart! Anyway, I was able to stop myself from laughing out loud in sheer happiness, but alas, I could not stop myself from smiling. Beaming mischievously, I asked Uddhava, “You have not yet given me any news about Radha.”

Uddhava instantly replied, “I really thought you were an intelligent person and you would gauge Radha’s plight listening about the other people’s condition. But if you wish to rather hear it from me, then listen; she has lost her mind completely. Neither does she laugh or cry, nor does she speak to anyone. All she does is loiter about in the by-lanes of Vrindavan all day long, like a mad woman. It almost seems as if she is searching for you in every nook and corner of Vrindavan.”

Deep in my heart, I thought, ‘Perhaps Radha is not very sincere in her

search. For, if she had been sincere, then she would have surely found me in every nook and cranny of Vrindavan.' Of course, I kept quiet and did not mention it out aloud, for today, it was time for the talkative Kanhaiya to listen quietly. But what was even more amusing was that Uddhava dozed off after venting out all his anger on me. And he once again left me alone with the memories of Vrindavan. How enchanting and ethereal my childhood was! Actually, only if one spends his childhood in a village, does it become magical and memorable. However, it is just as true, that one can progress in life only when one spends his youth in a city. But let us forget all this for now. Presently, my primary concern was to somehow ease Uddhava's sadness, and that of all the other inhabitants of Vrindavan, for I could not bear to see them unhappy. But how could I do that? They all wanted Kanhaiya, who, at this point in time, was in Mathura and could not afford to leave Mathura. And without my being present in Vrindavan, their unhappiness was certainly not going to be wiped out. Clearly, the matter was complex, and so it was necessary that I chose a middle path. I began pondering over it, and no sooner had I begun my deliberations, than everything became crystal clear. The essence of the matter was that the inhabitants of Vrindavan were despondent because of their attachment to me, and I was unhappy because my own heart was full of love for them. Indeed, these were our personal weaknesses which had no connection with the current circumstances. It meant that regardless of our personal difficulties, Nature continued to play its game in its own unique way. Therefore, I had to abide by the circumstances created by Nature, which implied that we had to take the responsibility of maintaining our composure. The moment this thought crossed my mind, I lay down beside Uddhava and drifted into a deep, peaceful sleep.

The next day, I took Uddhava for an early morning stroll. Of course, the walk was just an excuse; actually, I wanted to explain the current situation to him. So, after walking for a bit, I said to him in a serious tone, "Listen Uddhava, it would not be right if bhaiya and I were to close our new business venture, which we have set up with great difficulty, and return to Vrindavan. Besides, I have a duty towards my grandfather as well. He frequently needs me. You tell me, in such circumstances, how I can come to Vrindavan?"

I had said this with all earnestness, and I must praise Uddhava, for he replied with the same gravity, "Alright, so come for just a few days."

I said, "My dear friend, if I stay for a few days, neither would I be able to enjoy myself fully, nor would any of you be satisfied. On the contrary, this will merely aggravate the pain of separation."

My reasoning was straightforward and clear, but still, Uddhava was not prepared to listen to me. I was astounded, as this had never happened before and

I wondered why? It was only after probing him repeatedly that I learnt something that I would never have been able to imagine in my wildest dreams. The fact was, that Uddhava had not come here willingly. He had been threatened and forced to come to Mathura. And can you guess who had threatened him? The gopis! Honestly, I had never seen Uddhava so frightened before. Trembling with fear, he said, “Kanhaiya, listen to me carefully. If I return without you, the gopis will surely kill me!”

In my heart of hearts, I thought, ‘What was this? Just because Kanhaiya was not returning, Uddhava would be killed! What has he got to do with it?’ Frankly speaking, when I thought a little more about this, even I was alarmed for a moment; the gopis were really a terror. Seeing me lost in thought, Uddhava went on, “Listen Kanhaiya! They have given me a clear warning that if I fail to bring you back this time, I should not even dare to set foot in Vrindavan!”

I realised that at present, the fear of the furious gopis had completely overwhelmed Uddhava. Actually, he had always been terrified of the gopis. Why just Uddhava, everybody was scared of the gopis! Even bhaiya never got along well with them. Indeed, I was the only one in all of Vrindavan who not only got along well with the gopis but had also been their favourite and most beloved all through my childhood. In fact, the gopis were frightened of me! A voice in my head admonished me, ‘Stop boasting and come back to reality, Kanhaiya! All that is history! Today, the gopis have become domineering; think about that. What about the fact that they are all set to rebel? Well, if I could pacify someone like Radha, then did the gopis stand a chance?’ But before that, let me convince Uddhava! And once I set my mind to some task, how difficult could it really be? I somehow managed to sweet talk Uddhava and got him to agree to return alone to Vrindavan. I told him, “When you carry a personal message from me to the gopis, they will calm down and be pleased. Then they will not harass you at all.” To tell you the truth, having already experienced the fury of the gopis, Uddhava wasn’t really convinced; but still, he had courageously chosen to take my word that they wouldn’t harass him. He thought, ‘After all, I am taking back Kanhaiya’s message. Perhaps, they will spare me.’ My message was replete with sage advice. The gist of the message was, “My dear gopis, your Kanhaiya can never be separated from any of you. In spirit, he is staying with all of you in Vrindavan even at this moment. Physical proximity depends on time, whereas mental togetherness is everlasting. And mentally I am with all of you, all the time; so, you can never be separated from me. Understand this ultimate truth and be happy.”

Now, I do not know to what extent Uddhava had understood my message, but yes, he certainly learnt it by rote. But surprisingly, although he had

memorised the message by heart, and had my assurances, he was still scared at the thought of returning to Vrindavan for some reason. This meant that the threat of the gopis was still playing on his mind. Honestly speaking, I could not help but laugh at his predicament. But like always, it is always easy to laugh at someone else's state than your own. Still, the question worth pondering over was, were the gopis really capable of frightening someone to such an extent? Or was Uddhava just suffering the consequences of his own weakness? Well, it no longer mattered what it was, as I had now reached home with Uddhava after gleaning the secret from him, and having convinced him to return to Vrindavan.

After staying for a couple of days, Uddhava finally left for Vrindavan, but he had once again revived the golden memories of Vrindavan in my mind and heart. Furthermore, he had also set an avalanche of unnecessary curiosities in my mind. How would the gopis react to my message? How would they treat Uddhava? Now, on one hand, were my memories of Vrindavan, and on the other, were these countless curiosities sprouting in my mind. How could my mind focus on anything else? Only a few days had elapsed in this dilemma and this endless thinking, when to my utter amazement on reaching home one evening, I found Uddhava waiting for me. He was strolling around the garden, his face masked in misery. I was completely dumbfounded by his arrival. But what shocked me even more was that he appeared even more traumatised than before. To tell you the truth, upon seeing him in this condition despite the fact that he had carried and delivered my message, scared me for a moment. But there were more surprises in store for me. This time, he had not arrived alone; my dear sister Subhadra too had accompanied him. And she was seated on the swing, smiling as she watched Uddhava restlessly pacing to and fro in the garden. Needless to say, the moment I saw Subhadra, all my thoughts had shifted from Uddhava's condition to her presence. Naturally, my happiness knew no bounds on seeing her in Mathura. Meanwhile, bhaiya too had returned and was overwhelmed with joy on seeing Subhadra at home. Mother, on the other hand, was so elated, that she went to the kitchen and began preparations for a royal feast. As for Subhadra, she too was overjoyed on meeting her brothers after such a long time. It was only much later that I came to know that it was Mother Yashoda's wise decision to send Subhadra to Mathura along with Uddhava. She wanted Subhadra to use this opportunity to see the great city of Mathura, while also basking in the affection of her brothers.

My mother's decisions were truly wonderful! She was so concerned about the happiness of her darling son! Subhadra's arrival had filled our dull, drab lives in Mathura with colour and gaiety. We both were very happy, but Subhadra's happiness was beyond compare. She was extremely delighted at the

very sight of such a wonderful city, and her heart was soaring with joy. Bhaiya and I went and sat on the swing on either side of the chirpy Subhadra. Mother had sent some fruits and other food preparations which we were eating with relish while chatting away with our dear sister. The best part of the scenario was, that right in front of us, poor Uddhava was pacing to and fro in a foul temper scratching his head, but none of us were paying any attention to him! Even though we paid no heed to him, his long face was certainly dampening the joy we felt with Subhadra's arrival. Though I did not want them to, it was a fact that thousands of questions were cropping up in my mind out of curiosity, to know the reason for his gloominess. For some time, I kept my curiosity in check and refreshed my memories of Vrindavan while chatting with my sister; but finally, I could no longer control myself. Jumping down from the swing, I went to Uddhava, put my arm around his shoulder and took him for a stroll in the by-lanes.

Interestingly, although we had set off for a stroll, neither did he tell me anything, nor did I ask. Moreover, despite my best efforts, I was unable to solve the mystery behind his despondency. Meaning, even my intelligence came to naught on seeing his plight. Finally, I gave up and directly asked him the reason. I was absolutely stunned on hearing what he had to tell me. He said, "As soon as I reached Vrindavan, I asked all the gopis including Radha to gather around. At first, when they saw that I was alone, they literally pounced upon me. But when I told them that I had a message from you, they calmed down to some extent. And all of them caught me and dragged me far away to the banks of the River Yamuna. After all, it was their dear Kanha's message, so they wanted to listen to it in peace. Seeing that the mood was set, I rattled off the message you had given me. I have absolutely no idea what the gopis inferred from your fancy little message, but as soon as I delivered it, they began to hurl abuses at me! Not being satisfied with hurling abuses at me, they then began to rain blows on me! They even used derogatory words against me, and called me 'wicked' and 'good-for-nothing'. When this too failed to satisfy them, they did not spare you either. They vented their fury on you as well. In fact, they spoke very derisively about you! They said, "A wicked person's friend is also wicked; what else could he be?" To be honest, they derided you using a host of other disgraceful names."

Poor Uddhava became very sad as he said all this, but I burst out laughing on hearing about the manner in which the gopis had behaved. Well, I felt like laughing, so I did, and after my laughter had subsided, still giggling away, I asked Uddhava, "Really? Well, tell me frankly, what were the superlatives used to describe me?"

Perhaps, Uddhava liked this question, so pat came the reply, "Do not

even ask! They praised you with several words such as trickster, cheater, betrayer, liar, fraud, selfish charlatan and imposter! One of the gopis was repeatedly casting aspersions on your character. Her allegation was, ‘Kanhaiya must have been allured by city girls. That is why he has forgotten us!’ Uddhava continued, “Hearing her, another gopi taunted, ‘I have heard that these days, he struts around the city with Malini. So, naturally, he must have lost interest in simple village gopis like us!’ And this tirade went on and on. One of them even said, ‘It is pride that has gone to his head; because he has become a brave hero after going to the city. But that ungrateful wretch has forgotten that all his heroic deeds have their roots here, in Vrindavan!’ Another gopi said, ‘He has gone to Mathura and has become a great businessman. But he has forgotten, that here, he would steal our butter and eat. Would he find that kind of sweetness over there?’”

Now, what could I do after hearing such sweet words spoken in my honour? So, I just kept quiet and listened carefully to their speculation of my character with a smile on my face! I even laughed out loudly, especially at the hilarious bits. However, Uddhava clearly could not approve of my shameless smiles, and he was becoming even more irritated. Well, let him, what could I do about that? I had begun to feel hungry, so I turned back and started walking towards home. All this was fine, but the trouble was, that as soon as I had started laughing, Uddhava had fallen silent. But I wanted to hear all that he had to say, so I again enquired with a laugh, “All the gopis said so much; but did Radha not say anything?”

This time, Uddhava became furious. He pushed my hand off his shoulder and replied sarcastically, “Why not? She too said quite a few things, but I assumed that you did not care about what Radha had to say. Besides, you are so smart; after hearing what the gopis said, it is hardly difficult for you to guess what she had to say!”

Amazingly, in spite of his nervousness and irritation, Uddhava did not fail to drip sarcasm with every word! However, he was a very dear friend and so he gave in quickly to my coaxing. He did tell me exactly what dear Radha, the life of my life, had to say. He said, “She remained silent till the time the gopis were venting their ire on me and thrashing me. Not only that, it was she in fact who was instigating them to do all that! I was fortunate that they dragged me to the River Yamuna and beat me up there. Had I been thrashed in the village, how could I show my face to the cowherd boys?” Hearing this, I felt like guffawing, but this time, I managed to keep my laughter in check. Otherwise, it would have unnecessarily delayed the account of Radha’s reaction. As soon as I sympathised with him, Uddhava began speaking again. “Actually, the gopis were just about to cool down, having vented their fury on me, when Radha instigated them once

again, saying, 'He was always a fraud. Cheating is intrinsic to his nature. In his entire message, he has not mentioned even once that he would return here. Scoundrel! From the very beginning, he has considered himself very smart and has believed others to be fools!' Radha's outburst fuelled the rage of the other gopis even further. Then all of them got together and passed a resolution of sorts. 'If Kanha does not care for us, then even we know how to discard him from our minds! Let him loiter around with the girls of Mathura. No one misses him here, in Brij!' Saying this, not only did they beat me up once again but also shunted me out of Vrindavan. They vehemently said, 'Neither does Vrindavan need Kanha, nor does it need his stupid 'messengers'!' I was so scared that I did not dare to return to the village at all, and so I quietly came here."

Honestly speaking, I too was deeply perturbed, and on hearing Uddhava's narration of his agonising experience; my smile vanished into thin air. I thought, 'If I were to go back to Vrindavan, would they greet me too in a similar manner?' The moment this thought crossed my mind, I fell silent. I began to imagine myself being beaten up by the gopis on the banks of the Yamuna. I saw myself hopping about, not because I was dancing, but rather to escape from a sound thrashing! The scene that I imagined was really terrifying. But I soon composed myself and affectionately said to Uddhava, "It does not matter. They may not need a 'messenger' but I certainly do. You can stay with me in Mathura." Now, did the poor fellow have any other option? Besides, after having successfully carried these two messages back and forth, Uddhava had become a seasoned messenger. Indeed, from then onwards, Uddhava became my lifelong messenger, very conscientiously taking my messages to others and bringing me back theirs. So, I can very well say that even the ire of the gopis benefitted me!

Apart from that, I gained something more on reaching home. By now, even father had returned and mother had finished cooking. Thanks to the joy we felt on Subhadra's arrival, the mood had become festive. All of us had our meals outside in the garden. This too was a one-of-a-kind experience, which was not at all possible in Vrindavan. For one thing, a meal there did not mean different delicacies like it did here. There, we would have only the inevitable fruits-flowers and curd. Secondly, there weren't any servants in Vrindavan either. However, Subhadra's arrival had indeed changed the ambience at our home that day. Mother and Father sat on the swing, Subhadra occupied a nearby seat. And the three of us plopped ourselves on the ground and kept chatting late into the night. Everything so far was proceeding well, but the trouble began later in the night. Uddhava, who had vented out all his frustration, started snoring like a bear as soon as his head hit the pillow. But in my mind, the outburst of the gopis began playing once again. After quite a bit of deliberation, at least one thing was

clear: the behaviour of the gopis had merely brought to light the hidden shortcomings in my own message. Only my arrival in Vrindavan, or a definite date of my arrival in the future, could have satisfied them. These lovelorn girls were not going to fall for empty words. I have no hesitation in accepting that it was stupid of me to cast pearls of wisdom in front of these gopis who were so lovesick. And it was this very lesson that I learnt from the gopis, which I much later explained to Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita. *“Bhakti, or devotion, is complete in itself. There is no need to supplement it with pious deeds or knowledge.”*⁶ Does a heart filled with love ever need to know or conceive any information? Love is in itself the essence of all truths. It was not that the gopis had not comprehended my message, but the truth was that the lovelorn gopis had fathomed the worthlessness of the message I sent. It was nothing short of a wonder that they had understood that neither had Kanha visited them nor had he given any indication of his arrival in the future. Therefore, they felt that my message was nothing but sheer nonsense. And honestly, this unexpected behaviour of the gopis and the love hidden behind it, filled me with an intense yearning to be with them. I felt an overpowering urge to immediately set off for Vrindavan. But alas, the prevailing circumstances were still the same. On considering the situation in Mathura, it was not possible to leave in such haste. And that was how things stood at the moment. I could not shirk my duty for my self-interest. So, I consoled myself somehow and put myself to sleep by midnight.

However, the next morning, I was astonished to see Uddhava, to whom I had explained the situation the night before, lose his composure again. He once again began to insist on my returning to Vrindavan. Just like him, I too changed track. Instead of outright refusal, I reassured him, saying, “When Subhadra has had her fill of Mathura, we all will go together to Vrindavan. And you wait and see, as soon as I reach Vrindavan, I will set everything right.” Needless to add, this assurance of mine helped Uddhava regain his composure to some extent. Even bhaiya and Subhadra were very happy with my decision. So, now let us put aside this topic of Uddhava and talk about our main guest, meaning our darling sister, Subhadra. At present, both bhaiya’s and my attention was undoubtedly focussed wholly on her. Every day, I used to take her for a tour around the marketplace. Sitting beside me in the chariot, she would feel elated. I had even bought her lots of clothes and jewellery. In short, I had not spared any effort in taking good care of my dear sister. Bhaiya too did not lag behind in looking after her. Every evening, he too would take Subhadra to his shop in the marketplace and buy lots of clothes and trinkets for his darling sister. And the best news was

that with time, even Uddhava was getting charmed by the atmosphere in Mathura. Now he had begun to manage all the work at our cowshed. Occasionally, he would even go with bhैया to help at the shop. In short, both Subhadra and Uddhava were very happy spending their days in Mathura. And with them, we too were enjoying ourselves to the hilt. But yes, there was one problem. After the arrival of Subhadra, the frequency of my meetings with Malini had reduced considerably. Oh well, I could not have all the joys of life simultaneously, right? Still, there can be no two opinions about the fact, that thanks to our flourishing business and the company of Subhadra and Uddhava, the days seemed to flit away for us.

About a month later, while we were chatting after dinner one night, a messenger from the royal palace suddenly arrived with a summons from grandfather to come to the palace for a meeting of the council of ministers. I wondered, “Why was the council meeting being held so late into the night? Had some grave trouble befallen Mathura?” Thinking perhaps this was the case, I quickly reached the royal palace. I had guessed correctly and saw that the court was packed to capacity. Grandfather seemed really worried, so much so that he was pacing around his throne. The commander-in-chief was also in a similar restless condition. He was constantly pacing around the entire court. The rest of the people in the court were seated in their respective places wearing a look of great despair. I was stunned upon witnessing this scene; what could I do? When I could not comprehend what was happening, I too began to walk behind my grandfather. Nobody was saying anything, and it was not my place to come forward and ask what was happening. Then I found out that the Yadava elite had also been summoned, and it was for them that everyone was waiting. So, I thought that I should also wait for them. As soon as they started trickling in, grandfather took his seat and so did I. Along with the Yadava elite, the *Rajguru*, the royal preceptor, *Acharya* and other eminent people were also streaming in. The situation was beyond my comprehension. Yes, the fact that all the important people of Mathura were assembling here at this late hour, implied that the matter was indeed quite serious. Even a child could sense this bit. But in order to comprehend what could have been the reason for this late-night meeting, my political acuity was proving to be too weak. Just then, a voice within me said, ‘So why don’t you admit that?!’ Of course, I knew that. That is why I quietly sat beside grandfather with a serious expression on my face. On seeing these new problems cropping up on a daily basis, I had at least realised that being a king, or ruling a kingdom, was no laughing matter. To tell you the truth, at this moment, I was proud of my decision of not having accepted the kingship of Mathura. From a distance, it might appear that a king enjoys a life of splendour, but the truth is

that his responsibilities are a thousand times more than the grand life it accords.

Nevertheless, when almost all the people had arrived, King Ugrasena began to speak. He said, "As you all know, Kansa's wives have been staying in Magadha since the past several days. We all know how much they were grieving. It seems that they could not bear their sorrow and anger any longer, and driven by their anguish, they have instigated their father, King Jarasandha against Mathura. Now, being an old enemy of Mathura, how long would it take for Jarasandha to get instigated by his daughters?" The king continued in a heavy voice, "And the grave consequence of this instigation is, that Jarasandha has decided to attack Mathura. In fact, our spies have brought the news that many other kings have also joined hands with Jarasandha to fight against Mathura. This is not all, this gargantuan, collective army is on its way to attack Mathura even as we speak. According to our spies, the army will reach Mathura in about fifteen days. Jarasandha has given clear orders to his army that the two boys, Krishna and Balarama, be killed on sight, and Mathura be destroyed as much as possible."

The matter was grave indeed. Naturally, the entire courtroom was stunned into silence upon hearing this news. Trepidation ruled the entire court. Of course, I had known from the very beginning that my aunts would definitely stir things up in some way or the other. But it was certainly beyond my imagination that their anger would bring about such terrible consequences. The news had certainly affected the courtiers to some extent, but it had shaken me up to the core. Firstly, it was I who was the root of this conflict and secondly, it was I who was Jarasandha's primary target too. With a long face and downcast eyes, I quietly sank lower into my seat. Finally, grandfather broke the silence in the courtroom. He did not say much but asked everyone to present their solutions to this grave problem at hand. However, no one spoke; indeed, there was truly nothing one could say. Once again, a heavy, almost palpable silence fell over the courtroom. I was feeling extremely uneasy. Finally, I could not remain seated any longer; I got up from my seat and began pacing the room as the commander had done. No doubt, since I was the cause of this trouble, I was not meeting anybody's gaze. Meaning, I was walking with my head lowered. At the same time, in my mind, I was getting a bit annoyed with everyone. When we knew that Jarasandha was going to attack, then why were we not discussing ways of defending ourselves from his attack? Why didn't they understand that it was a question of my life, after all? The voice within me interrupted again, 'No, Kanhaiya! Why should anybody be bothered about your life? You alone should try to save your life.' But what could I do? If it was an animal, demon or the devil himself that was coming, then I could deal with it. But this was an entire

army that was bearing down on us. The voice retorted, ‘So what? Don’t you want to become a king sooner or later? Don’t you have to prove yourself to Rukmini? And forget all that. Don’t you want to live?’ Yes, yes! Why not? I got charged up. Firstly, it was my life that was in peril. Secondly, it was a question of proving myself to my lifeline, meaning Rukmini. I remembered the conclusion that I had drawn earlier in life. The path to overcome any trouble comes only from action. Meaning, nothing would be achieved by just sitting and waiting for Jarasandha to attack, we had only one choice and that was to act. With this thought, my deliberation became active and the confidence in my abilities soared. And you will not believe, after deliberating for quite a while, it was I who broke the silence prevailing in the courtroom. Standing in the centre of the courtroom, I addressed the commander-in-chief with great confidence, “I need to know the preparations that Mathura has made to deal with the problem.”

In a grave voice, the commander-in-chief replied, “Jarasandha’s army by itself is sufficient to rout Mathura. That being the case, it is clear that Mathura cannot hold back this combined army for even seven days. The main reason for this was that King Kansa had never felt the need to maintain a powerful army. After all, the entire Aryavarta belt knew that Kansa was Jarasandha’s son-in-law. And in the entire region, who would dare to attack Jarasandha’s son-in-law?”

My spirits dampened on hearing this. The trepidation of the entire court intensified, and silence once again descended heavily over the courtroom. Indeed, what could one say in such circumstances? In fact, most of the people felt that it was useless to even hold a discussion on this topic. They had their reasons, but then, the Yadava elite, who had been waiting for such an opportunity, thought of playing a new game. They anyway could not bear the sight of me, and now this terrible calamity had descended upon them solely because of me. For them, it was plain and simple that had I not killed Kansa, then Mathura would not have had to face such grave trouble. So, without considering anything else, they began glowering at me as if saying, “Why wait for Jarasandha to kill this boy?” Their malevolent glances were enough to give me a sense of what they were thinking, but I thought it prudent not to pay any attention to them. They could be dealt with later; first I had to find a way to save us all from Jarasandha. But how would I go about looking for a way to extricate us all from this situation? That was precisely the problem. Despondency had engulfed me to such an extent that even my mind had gone numb. Now whether my mind supports me or not, I couldn’t just give up. I could not simply embrace death, and besides, this was not in my nature either. Meaning, I had to fight the circumstances at any cost. Thus, I somehow activated my thought process. And once my thought process was activated, my mind began to conceive a strategy

and began drawing up battle plans. Now, when the attack was inevitable, we had no option but to fight and defend ourselves. Besides, I did not have to contend with the entire army of Jarasandha all by myself. The entire kingdom of Mathura was with me. All these thoughts were racing through my mind, when suddenly grandfather broke the silence in the court. Taking a deep breath and expressing his faith in me once again, he asked, "Tell us Kanhaiya...what should we do?"

There was so much that I wanted to say. I wanted to motivate everybody to save my life. But I was still in a dilemma whether I should speak or not. After all, it was me he wanted to attack and not Mathura. And under the circumstances, I couldn't understand how appropriate it would be for me to voice my opinions. But I had analysed the situation correctly. Looking at it from another perspective, it was a question of my life, so it did not matter what was 'appropriate' or 'inappropriate'! If I wanted to save my life, then I would have to speak. Besides, grandfather had asked for my opinion, so why hesitate? Perhaps, a way could be found out of this dreadful situation. At any rate, no one else was saying anything. Why would they? It was my life that was at stake, so finally, albeit out of compulsion, I began to speak with full confidence, "In my opinion, all questions like whether Mathura wants war or not, whether we are in a position to fight it or not, are irrelevant now. Jarasandha has thrust this war upon us. Thus, I primarily want you all to understand that this war is inevitable. I am still a novice and unable to understand the ramifications of such a great battle. Until now, the only fighting experiences that I have had have been with wild animals, or at best, defeating a few wrestlers in single combat. This, on the other hand, is a fight between two armies and two kingdoms. Even so, I feel it is my duty to share with you the conclusion which I have drawn based on the discussions so far. If my understanding is flawed, then kindly forgive me, for, as I said earlier, I do not have any great experience in fighting a battle of this kind."

Hearing me speak thus, grandfather encouraged me further by saying, "Yes, yes, go ahead Kanhaiya and speak your mind with confidence. You have always given wise counsel; we are eager to hear your suggestions on this matter as well."

This encouragement from grandfather did not go down well with the Yadava elite. But as I have said before, this was definitely not the time to pay attention to them. Right now, Jarasandha's imminent attack and the threat to my life were the only issues that seemed real to me. And in this scenario, this encouragement from grandfather was enough for me. Thus, I continued speaking further and said, "In the present circumstances, it is useless to be idealistic and hope for no damages at all. What I mean is, Mathura will have to bear losses to some extent. Thus, it would be wise for us to focus on all those solutions which

will help us minimise the damage as much as possible. If we decide not to fight, then Jarasandha, meaning the Magadha army, will establish its permanent rule over Mathura. And if they do, we will still suffer damage to lives and property. And unfortunately, the point to be noted is that the matter will not end there. We should not forget that we have just recently sacked the Magadha division from within our borders, and we also know that it was these soldiers of the Magadha division who had perpetrated all the atrocities on the Yadavas during Kansa's reign. Therefore, it is certain that if they snatch power in Mathura, these infuriated Magadha soldiers will terrorise the people of Mathura with twice the ferocity they had shown before. Those cruel soldiers will vent all their anger at being sacked, on the innocent people of Mathura. Therefore, it was essential that we fight, if not to save the kingdom itself, then at least to save the inhabitants of Mathura from this terrible backlash."

The matter was crystal clear, and everyone understood it immediately. Thereafter, I was not only praised, but everyone also realised their duty. Optimist that I was, I could also feel that everyone was mentally gearing up for the battle. However, all this was just my perception; in the court, as usual, deathly silence pervaded once again. I thought to myself, well, so be it; but for the moment, my enthusiasm had soared owing to the praise which I had received, and with the hope that my words would have a positive outcome. As you are well aware, once I got enthused, my mind raced at an unimaginable speed. Just then I remembered the killing of Kuvalyapeed. Was that mad elephant any less strong? But with my unconventional evasive tactics, I had managed to slay him too. My strategy at that time was to hide when he launched an attack, and counter-attack at the first opportunity. I thought why not use the same strategy with Jarasandha as well? He may be powerful. But Krishna had a fitting response ready for every kind of storm. The plan had become clear in my mind. My self-confidence was already boosted; so, I was raring to share my plan. However, even now, all this quick thinking continued only in my mind. Outwardly, I remained silent. I was waiting for someone or the other to react, but the silence just dragged on. I didn't want such a perfect plan to be wasted by speaking about it without being asked to do so. Besides, this was the only idea I could cling on to, which would make a difference between my life and death. Idea aside, but what about this deafening silence? Well, as always, once again it was grandfather who spoke up first and broke the silence. He addressed me directly and said, "Kanhaiya, we have understood what you have said. We are ready for war too. But can you suggest a strategy for this war?"

Look! I was getting just what I wanted. Did he even need to ask such a question? This was exactly my heart's desire. I was just anticipating such a

request and was eagerly waiting to present this strategy of mine. So, before anybody could interject or deviate from the discussion, I promptly stood up in my place and began addressing the court, “It is an accepted fact that until the king is defeated, or the palace is captured, the battle cannot be considered as won. Therefore, if we protect the fort with fortifications, then it will not be so easy for Jarasandha to destroy Mathura’s strong fort and conquer it. What I mean is, we will not allow King Ugrasena to go out of the fort-like palace. He can’t be defeated if he doesn’t fight, can he? With this, the possibility of our losing the battle will automatically become almost nil. Another important factor to be considered here is that this war is being fought only because of Jarasandha’s obstinacy. Obviously, the other kings are not particularly interested in it. They neither want revenge nor do they have any interest in Mathura. Under the circumstances, if we are able to keep the battle going for a long time, then it is certain that they will soon get exhausted. Needless to say, the enemy forces are travelling from quite afar, so the fatigue of the journey will anyway have taken a toll on them. In which case, if we can somehow obstruct their supply of food and water, then they will definitely get enervated and retreat very soon. Therefore, we must first send the elders, the women and children to the rear portion of the palace so that they can be kept completely safe during this entire war. Along with that, we will have to empty out our marketplaces, so that they do not find the opportunity to loot and stock up on food and other things necessary for survival. Not only that, we should also burn down all the forests in the area from where the attacking army is going to enter Mathura. This move will deny them the necessary fruits and flowers from the forests. Not just that, we will also have to poison all the ponds and water bodies on the path of the army so that their soldiers do not get even drinking water. In fact, we will also have to contaminate all the wells of Mathura. And as far as drinking water for ourselves is concerned, we will easily get it from the River Yamuna. Since it flows on the rear side of the palace, it is completely safe to go to the river because the enemy cannot reach it without conquering the fort first.”

After I finished saying all this, I became silent for a moment, but I could see the sparkle return to the eyes of all the courtiers. Grandfather too saw a ray of hope in my plan. Even the commander-in-chief began to recover his lost self-confidence. All the others began to heap praises on me. Naturally, the nervousness that had pervaded the courtroom earlier had also diminished considerably. Needless to say, everybody became eager to hear the rest of the plan. Was there any need to wait? Was I one to remain silent after receiving such a positive response? I too began to elaborate on the rest of my plan with twice the enthusiasm, “The most important thing is, we will not go out to fight with

them but will wait for them to come to us. That is, we will not fight face-to-face, but will use guerrilla tactics instead. With this objective in mind, all the houses that fall in the path of the attacking army will be converted into strongholds, and from there, our regiments will fight, not all together, but turn by turn. The biggest advantage of this will be that our energy and strength will be maintained throughout the fight. I am not only hopeful, but certain that by employing this strategy, Jarasandha's army will not be able to conquer the fort, and due to the shortage of food and water, they will also not be able to stay in Mathura for long. In short, our focus should be only on tactics that can minimise our losses and prolong the battle. In this way, we will certainly be able to save our dear Mathura and its citizens."

I sat down once I had finished elucidating my plan, but unbelievably, everybody enthusiastically stood up as one, and gave me a standing ovation in praise of my plan! Without any further argument, it was decided to follow my plan to the letter and fight the war. In fact, I too felt very proud of myself for the wonderful strategy I proposed and the honour I received on it being accepted. However, the credit for nurturing my skills had to be given entirely to my grandfather; but even so, it was I who had honed them. That said, before the break of dawn, everything was decided. Once all the decisions were taken, I ran towards home. This was certainly the most memorable and successful night of my life so far. My analysis and awareness had taken such a giant leap today, that it would be very difficult for anyone to confront me in the future. I could feel a surge of self-confidence, lifting my spirits so high that if anyone were to praise me even a little at this time, my esteem would rocket to the skies. To cut a long story short, at the time of returning home, the mood I was in was indescribable. It was dawn by the time I reached home, but still, I thought it best to grab some much-needed rest. I even managed to sleep for a while. And honestly, even this short nap reinvigorated me completely.

Naturally, bhaiya, Uddhava, father and all others were eagerly waiting for me to wake up. All of them were well aware that a summons from the palace at that late hour could not have been an invitation to celebrate some festival. Moreover, the very fact that I had returned almost at dawn made the gravity of the situation quite evident. All in all, their restlessness was at its peak. But I thought it prudent to finish my morning routine, freshen up and then explain the matter to them in detail. Since they had waited this long already, they could wait a while longer. As soon as I had freshened up, I told them about the details of the discussion that had taken place at the palace. Just as I had expected, everybody was quite anxious... except for bhaiya. He, on the contrary, was elated at the news, because he would get an opportunity to fight in a battle. It was evident to

all that he was certainly the most muscular and skilled fighter in the whole of Mathura at this time. Perhaps, it was because of this, that his valorous self was anxious for an opportunity to impress the people of Mathura. As he would have wished for, I had allotted only one task to bhaiya, and that was to prepare himself both physically and mentally for this war. What objection could bhaiya have to this? He immediately busied himself in exercising and training with his mace for the war. I also decided to send Uddhava and Subhadra back to Vrindavan. I did not want any harm to befall them in the chaotic times to come. Considering the time constraint, I had speedily finished making all these decisions.

Speaking of time, what a strange turn it had taken! I had been lost in dreams about all of us returning to Vrindavan, and here I was, forced to send back the two people dear to me who had come from there! How lovely were the dreams that I had seen! I had been dreaming of going to swim with the cowherd boys in the River Yamuna, dance the *Raasa* with the gopis and play all the games that we had played all day long since childhood. In short, I had dreamt that I would relive my childhood to the fullest. In fact, I thought, that this time around, I would pacify Radha in such a manner, that she would not be angry with me for the rest of her life. But all my dreams had been shattered. Perhaps, this is what life is all about; nothing happens as per your plans. For that matter, who has ever achieved all that he has desired? As such, one should understand two things clearly with regard to desires. Firstly, if you desire something, then wish for it with all your heart, and then when the opportunities to fulfill those desires present themselves, never miss them. Secondly, if the circumstances are not favourable and your desire cannot be fulfilled for some reason, then never lament over it. For, the fulfillment or non-fulfillment of desires, the ebb and flow of trials and tribulations, are all part of the game of life. So, as long as there is breath left in the body, this game will continue. Thus, in my opinion, those who lament when their desires are not fulfilled, or those who get frightened of the trials and tribulations in their lives, neither have the right to desire nor do they have any right to live! It is quite clear that in this world, everyone keeps wishing for innumerable things. As a result, their desires keep conflicting with one another. Under these circumstances, it is impossible for everyone's desires to be fulfilled. Take the present example of Jarasandha, whose desire was to kill me, but my desire was to live. Now, it was not possible for both these desires to be fulfilled simultaneously. Also, why do we forget that Nature also has its own desire? A man's desire can still be thwarted; perhaps I could thwart Jarasandha's desires by making proper use of my intelligence and strength, but what of Nature's desires? It is the amalgamation of millions of desires and actions.

Therefore, the desire of Nature is the final ‘justice’. And one can neither thwart it nor can it be altered; it can only be accepted. For instance, I desired to attain Rukmini. So what difference would that make? Would Rukmi and the royal palace of Kundinpur allow their princess to marry a poor cowherd boy? Now the fact that I was a cowherd boy was Nature’s desire. The fact that she was a princess was also Nature’s desire. Along with this, there was Rukmini’s desire too, of which I was completely clueless right now. Under these circumstances, what was the point or significance of my desire? That is why I say that Rukmini was a dream for me; a dream which encouraged me to forge ahead in life; whether I finally attained her or not, was a different matter altogether. Similarly, there are several desires which a person is unable to fulfill because of his innate nature. Let us take my example to understand this matter too. There is no need for me to mention that I was yearning to go to Vrindavan. I even had a chariot of my own which could transport me there. I could have easily gone for a day or two. But it was my nature not to go anywhere half-heartedly. Whenever I decided to go to Vrindavan, I would go wholeheartedly—with no reservations or mental baggage. What I am saying is, I could not go to Vrindavan with the worries of the royal palace, the responsibility of my business and the anxiety about returning quickly weighing on my mind. In my opinion, it was better not to go at all than going with a distracted mind. Wouldn’t it be better if I just dreamt about Vrindavan instead? Wouldn’t it be better to play my flute and lose myself in the memories it evoked? In this way, I could at least get fully engrossed in this dreaming or lose myself in thoughts of Vrindavan. It is also important to understand that Vrindavan, Radha and Rukmini were not my sorrow; in fact, they were the sweet pains of my life. Actually, they had become one with me at such a deep and elemental level, that I always felt the sweet pangs of separation from them. But, at the same time, I never actually felt separated from them. That is precisely the difference between sorrow and pain. Pain has its own peculiar kind of joy; it has its own special sweetness, whereas sorrow is nothing more than self-destruction.

I was talking about the constraints of time, and see how I had got engaged in such futile contemplation! However, once again, I focussed all my attention on my tasks, and the most difficult task in front of me right now was to send Uddhava to Vrindavan. Indeed, both Uddhava and Subhadra had become despondent on hearing my proposal, but even then, they still had to be sent back. So, I abandoned all my other tasks, grabbed hold of Uddhava, and in a bid to make him understand, said, “Listen, Uddhava! We were planning a trip to Vrindavan together, and now trouble has befallen us! Perhaps, Nature does not want me to go to Vrindavan right now and enjoy its immense pleasures. And as

you are well aware, it is wise to accept the will of Nature, for there is nothing to be gained by going against it. Just keep one thing in mind; until the situation becomes stable in Mathura again, please stay away from this city and do not let anybody else from Vrindavan come here either.” Uddhava understood what I was saying, but he was enveloped in despair for not having been able to take me back to Vrindavan once again. However, this time, he had a genuine reason to furnish for his failure. He felt reassured that thanks to these reasons, at least this time around, he would not have to face the wrath of the gopis on reaching Vrindavan. That left only Subhadra, and there was no question of her going against anything proposed by bhaiya. Considering the long list of tasks that I had at hand, it was necessary to send them off immediately. So, I sent both of them back to Vrindavan in my own chariot with a charioteer riding it.

Well, after seeing them off safely, I went back to the royal palace late in the afternoon. After all, it was one thing to have a viable battle plan, but an entirely different matter to execute it. Although after the planned slaying of everyone right from Keshi to Kuvalyapeed, I had understood that a good strategy, if nothing else, is at least half the battle won. As I had expected, there was plenty of commotion at the palace. Every part of the palace, right from the gateway to the garden, was abuzz with activity. In fact, the welcome and attention that I was receiving had a distinct flavour to it today. But the real positive development was, that the commander-in-chief was now fully absorbed in the execution of his tasks. Instead of entering the palace, I too greeted the commander who was issuing orders to everyone in the garden and stood beside him. Around a hundred soldiers and several other skilled warriors were present there. As soon as I reached, the atmosphere became even more charged. To me, this entire scene was completely new. So, instead of offering advice, I became absorbed in observing the commander’s activities. Actually, he was busy segregating the army and organising it into regiments. Every regiment that he was forming comprised around two hundred soldiers. Interestingly, he kept giving instructions and three-four soldiers standing nearby kept jotting those down. Bhaiya, Satyaki, Chitraka, Shyam, Yuyudhana, Rajadhideva, Mudura, Shavfalak, Satrajit and I, along with all the other skilled fighters, were made the leaders of each of these regiments. A large regiment of five hundred soldiers was separately formed under the leadership of the commander-in-chief. The remaining one thousand soldiers were tasked with the responsibility of protecting the royal palace. I was very impressed with the efficiency of the commander-in-chief. Without wasting any time whatsoever, he had begun assembling the forces according to the battle plan. This was precisely the strategy that I had suggested wherein half the forces would protect the royal

palace, while the other half would be deployed for battle. Suddenly, I realised that it was almost evening and I was still standing with the commander. So, with his permission, I rushed towards the court. When I reached the court, I found grandfather waiting there for me impatiently. Surprisingly, the commander also arrived at the palace, running behind me. Perhaps, his task had also been completed. So, both of us entered the courtroom at the same time.

As I had expected, this time too, the courtroom was filled to capacity. All the Yadava leaders, the entire council of ministers and grandfather were present, along with all the others whose presence was required at the meeting. The treatment that I received this time around at the court was truly extraordinary. All in all, the way they greeted me clearly reflected the powerful effect that my proposed battle strategy had on them. Now, who does not like to be respected? Deep in my heart, I too was feeling immensely pleased by the respect that I was being accorded. You cannot even imagine the extent to which this respect from the royal court could touch the heart of a simple cowherd boy. Moreover, I felt a burst of pride when the commander-in-chief, stood before me like an obedient soldier and said, “My task of segregating the soldiers and forming the divisions is complete. Since the battle is being fought according to your strategy, you will not only have to give the orders from now on, but you also will have to suggest all the plans of action in case of contingencies.”

Well, I was already bursting with pride due to the veneration I had received in the court. And now, with the respect that was being accorded to me by the commander-in-chief, I felt as if I was on cloud nine; my feet no longer seemed to touch the ground! At the same time, my self-confidence too had rocketed sky high. As a matter of fact, this respect was not given without reason. Indeed, if it were to be analysed, what the commander-in-chief had said was true as well as practical; for it is an indisputable fact that whoever formulates the plan is the best person to implement it too. Nevertheless, before I got carried away by the respect and reverence that I was receiving, I took inspiration from the commander-in-chief and immediately gathered my wits about me. I quickly discarded my arrogance and prepared myself to shoulder the new responsibilities. Besides, the people in the courtroom were waiting eagerly for what I had to say. So, I immediately stood up and began speaking with utter humility, “I am not only very grateful for the respect and faith that the commander-in-chief of Mathura has placed in me, but at the same time, I also accept the responsibility of saving Mathura.”

On hearing this, grandfather reached up and patted me on my back. The moment he did so, I felt a surge of enthusiasm course through me. Feeling empowered now, I launched into a lengthy speech on the war strategy, “Before

any battle is to be fought, it is of utmost importance to prepare fully for it. And for that, as important it is to delegate responsibilities, it is equally important for everyone to carry out their duty responsibly. It is clear that we cannot counter Jarasandha's vast army with Mathura's army alone. And it is also certain that no other friendly kingdom would come to our aid at the cost of enmity with Jarasandha. So, obviously, the youth of Mathura will have to stand shoulder to shoulder with us and assist us. Not only they, but all the Yadava leaders too will have to take a keen interest and participate wholeheartedly in this war; they cannot be mere bystanders. We all know very well that Yadava leaders such as Satrajit, Satyaki, Chitraka, Shyam, Yuyudhana, Rajadhideva, Mudura, Shavfalak and Prasen have a strong influence on the youth of Mathura. Therefore, with grandfather's permission, I give these Yadava leaders the responsibility to not only take command of their regiments from today itself but also give them the additional responsibility of mobilising the youths. In my opinion, the role of these respected Yadava leaders in this war is far more important than that of the army of Mathura. It is also true that if the Magadha army captures Mathura, then the loss to the citizens of Mathura will be negligible as compared to the loss that these Yadava leaders and their clan will incur. For, it is only from them that Jarasandha will recover the battle cost on finding the royal treasury empty."

On this note, I ended my address and stood there quietly, casting furtive glances at the Yadava leaders. From their expressions, I could make out that my arrow had found its mark; everybody had been accorded the respect due to them and at the same time, I had also instilled fear in the minds of the Yadava leaders, which would now compel them to sincerely perform their tasks. Now, whether they liked it or not, they were forced to play their part in the war, and this was absolutely necessary in the current situation. As was the norm, the elite of the kingdom have nothing to do with wars. No matter whose reign it is, their positions remain intact. But I had given my proposal such a twist, that they had willingly accepted it. In fact, if they did not engage themselves in the present war, under the impression that they would be safe, then even the common people would consider this war as the responsibility of the kingdom alone, and refuse to participate in it. But Mathura was in no position to fight the war that was to take place, without utilising the collective force of its entire population. From this perspective, I had very cleverly succeeded in killing two birds with one stone. Enthused by this success, and taking their silence to mean acquiescence, I continued with my address. Interestingly, I now directly ordered them, "In the next ten days, the Yadava leaders and their group of young men will have two main tasks to finish. First, with the help of their army regiment, they will have to gather all the women, children and the elderly, and move them to the rear side of

the palace. Second, under the leadership of the Yadava leaders, the youth will also have to take care of the food arrangements for themselves and the entire army. All in all, they will have to make arrangements for at least a month's stock of food and water for everybody. This will undoubtedly have a positive impact on the fighting capacity of the army. Relieved from the anxiety of arranging for their food, the army can get down to prepare for war from today itself. And now I will come to the main battle plan and the deployment of the army regiments. As I have already said, all we want is to harass them and keep them trapped here for as long as possible. They may have come here to rout us in open battle, but we will keep trying to avoid getting into a battle with them. Meaning, we will not go and wage an open battle with them, but wait for them to come to us; and we will ensure that numerous obstacles are strewn in their path so that our encounters with them are kept to the bare minimum. So, all in all, we will wait for them to get harried and retreat. Some principal regiments have already been handed over the responsibility of amassing food and water and marshalling the youth. From the remaining regiments, the first task will go to the commander-in-chief's regiment which will narrow down the path route from Magadha as much as possible. Thereafter, they will have to ensure that the entire route that Jarasandha's army takes is laden with mud, sharp stones and thorns. In the same manner, they will then have to repeat this exercise on all the routes that connect to the royal palace, so that half the strength of the Magadha army gets depleted in merely finding the pathways and clearing it. On the other hand, bhaiya and I will lead our regiments to destroy all the possible sources of food and water they might have. We will pollute and poison all the ponds and wells that lie in the vicinity of the path the army will take. We will also destroy all the fruits and flowers in the forests that they will come across on their way to Mathura. Meaning, we will defer the battle for as long as possible and tire their army as much as we can. This will be the main strategy of our battle. I appeal to everyone that since we are running short on time, we should all get down to our respective tasks right away. Also, we will have to keep the council of ministers abreast of our progress at predetermined intervals. So, in a way, the council of ministers will work as a 'coordination committee'. Exactly after ten days from now, we will meet in this assembly hall once again to review our progress."

You may not believe it, but at this time, I held such sway over the royal court, that my battle plan was being accepted with far greater trust than the determination with which I outlined it. Nothing could give me greater pride than the fact that I, a mere cowherd boy, who had earlier fought just a few wild animals, was now steering a major battle. With this achievement, I also realised that I may not have been wealthy like a king, but in the context of war, my

stature had already risen to that of a king. And I was very happy on having acquired this capability, as I had taken a firm step towards making myself worthy of Rukmini...Oh no! Here I go again thinking of Rukmini! I severely reprimanded myself, 'Is this the time to think of such things? Don't you know how besotted you are with her? What if you lose yourself in her dreams and the battle and the strategy both fail miserably?' Immediately realising what was best for me, I bid adieu to Rukmini even before she took hold of my thoughts! I never did anything at an inappropriate time, so how could I now let someone else intrude my mind at the wrong time?

While I was lost in these thoughts, the court had become empty. Naturally, everyone, including me, had to begin executing the tasks that lay ahead. So, with grandfather's permission, I left for the wrestling arena in search of bhaiya. When duties were being allocated to all the regiments, the task of destroying all the fruits and vegetables in the jungle along the enemy's path had gone to bhaiya, and I was allotted the task of polluting all the water bodies along the way. The tasks that came our way were to our liking. Thus, as soon as I conveyed this news to bhaiya, who had been fighting with four wrestlers simultaneously in the wrestling club, he jumped with joy. To our good fortune, bhaiya's practice with the mace was coming along very well. According to what we had heard, Jarasandha was renowned for his phenomenal prowess with the mace. So, bhaiya's formidable skills in fighting with the mace could prove very crucial to this war. He had finished practicing for the day, and so we set off for home. On our way, during a discussion on the allocation of tasks, we realised that bhaiya's task was a bit too difficult. This was because before destroying the fruit trees, he had to gather as much fruit as possible for our own use. Indeed, during the war, it was these fruits that were going to sustain the people of Mathura. I quickly realised the importance of bhaiya's task, and instead of heading home, I turned the chariot towards the palace. On reaching the palace, I took the king's permission to make the arrangements to sanction ten bullock carts and around fifty workers to bhaiya. So now, bhaiya had to ensure that only the fruits which were of no use to us were destroyed.

Well, that night, he went off to sleep peacefully, but excited as he was, bhaiya got absorbed in his task from the next morning itself. He personally went to the palace and got together all the bullock carts, labourers and other necessities. I was not one to lag behind either! My task may have been easier, but it wasn't any less important. In my presence, I had all the water bodies filled with the bitter leaves of the *Neem* tree and thorns. Not just we, everybody worked hard to carry out the respective tasks assigned to them. Indeed, it was a sight to behold to see everybody so enthused and bursting with confidence. And

the effect of all these efforts was clearly visible at the royal court as well. The anxiety on everyone's faces had diminished considerably. In the next ten days, everybody had completed their respective tasks successfully. Most remarkably, even the Yadava leaders had been no less diligent than any of the others. All in all, it was now time to work out a final decisive war strategy. It was my responsibility to suggest the final strategy, and I was thoroughly prepared with it. Besides, today was the tenth day since the allocation of tasks, and everyone was present in the court. I too had reached the court well in time along with bhैया. I had never seen the court so crowded before. In fact, several additional seats had to be squeezed in to accommodate the people. While here, I was ready with my strategy considering the shortage of time, there, the entire court was also anxiously waiting to hear my plan.

Without further ado, I began outlining the battle strategy, "We all are well aware that Jarasandha's army is much stronger than ours in all respects. Meaning, we can never defeat this army in an open battle. Therefore, our plan is simple; we are not going to defeat them; we are merely going to exhaust them. We want them to get fatigued, give up and return empty-handed. And as I have said earlier, this is possible only when the war drags on for a long time. And a long-drawn-out war is only possible when instead of fighting, we make it a point to avoid it for as long as we can. And keeping this objective in mind, we have already decided that we will not go to battle at all; thus, left with no other option, Jarasandha and his army will have to come to us to fight. And that will be a testing time for us. For this purpose, I am dividing the army into two halves. One half, comprising the regiments of bhैया and the commander-in-chief, will fight Jarasandha's army face-to-face and the other half, which will include everyone else, will engage in guerrilla warfare; meaning, we will attack from hidden positions while shielding ourselves from their assaults. Our only objective will be to prolong this war for so long, that they get exhausted to the bone, and even if they try with all their might, no large contingent of soldiers should be able to venture anywhere near the palace. To prevent them from reaching the palace and to repeatedly harass them, we will keep attacking them intermittently from the houses located on the enemy's route. This sort of warfare will certainly be new for them, and will be sufficient to drive them insane. Moreover, beginning today, we will work day and night to ensure that every street that leads to the palace is made so narrow and mucky that the enemy soldiers have no choice but to expend all their energy in finding and clearing the pathway and thus get exhausted. However, despite all these preparations and obstructions, a thousand soldiers will still guard the palace at all times and at any cost protect the royal palace from Jarasandha's regiments. After all our preparations are in place, we will have to

try and achieve only one solitary objective: that no more than five hundred soldiers of the Magadha army manage to slip through and reach the palace at any given time, so that every regiment that reaches there is defeated and destroyed by our soldiers who will be twice the number.”

Indeed, although it was such an unconventional and unique battle plan, it was so perfect, that everybody was filled with renewed enthusiasm and hope on hearing it. This was the greatest need of the hour, and one immediate positive outcome of this mood was, that everybody was now absolutely ready for the battle to begin. The spies returned with the news that Jarasandha’s army was about to reach the outskirts of Mathura in a couple of days. Well, we too had made our preparations and were ready and waiting for them to arrive. The elderly folk and the women had already been put up near the banks of the River Yamuna. The shops had also been emptied; and as for the muddying of pathways, we did that with plenty of mud, slush, water, thorns and sharp stones already at our disposal; they only needed to be strewn across the roads. So as soon as we heard that Jarasandha was close, we got down to executing that task in earnest. Usually, it is creating something that takes time; destroying anything hardly takes long. Within just two days, the streets were ravaged to such an extent, that it was impossible to even walk on them.

As soon as our task was completed, as per the new practice, all of us began to reside within the palace walls. The council of ministers, the Yadava elite, and both us brothers had taken shelter in the nearby guesthouses. By way of work, we were just surveying the tasks accomplished till now, and at the most, bracing ourselves for the war by reassuring each other! But actually, the truth was that everyone was waiting for Jarasandha to arrive. And if there was one person who was finding this long wait unbearable, it was bhaiya! He was already in the same league as the greatest warriors of Mathura, and he was also being given the importance befitting his status. So, without thinking about the consequences of this battle, he was raring to prove his fighting prowess. Meanwhile, call it good news or bad, but Jarasandha did not make us wait for long. The setting sun was about to bid us farewell for the day and as was our routine, all of us were sitting in the court discussing the war strategy, when a spy brought the news of Jarasandha’s arrival. The news became even more terrifying, when we heard that his army comprised ten thousand soldiers, including several stalwarts of the battlefield and valiant warrior kings. Prominent among them were Shaalva, Shrutayu, Baadika, Gonarda, Dantvaka, Somaka, Chekitana, Shatdhanva, Viduratha and Jayadratha. Indeed, they were all great and seasoned warrior kings and it was clear that Jarasandha had arrived with the best of the armed regiments from several kingdoms, because only the best

regiments of a kingdom accompany the king. Besides, according to the news, the army appeared to be equipped with the latest and most modern weapons. Compared to them, all we had were woefully rusty swords and dented maces to fight with. True, we did have some small weapons such as lances, bows and arrows and so on; but in comparison to the enemy's arsenal, these were not even worth mentioning. I was already flustered when I heard about the size of the army and the names of kings accompanying Jarasandha, but after hearing about the advanced weaponry that the army was equipped with, my head began to spin. For a moment, all my optimism and enthusiasm evaporated into thin air. Clearly, the weapons of our destruction had plunked on Mathura's gate with fanfare and in great style! It also became increasingly clear that compared to the weapons they were equipped with, we would appear unarmed and helpless! Not just me, but all the courtiers were scared out of their wits. But bhaiya was the odd man out; even though he knew everything, his enthusiasm refused to abate! I could not put my finger on it, was it courage or immaturity, or was it just extreme enthusiasm? Regardless of what I thought it was, the reality was that if we intended to survive the war, it was necessary for us to emulate bhaiya's enthusiasm and keep our intelligence on the back burner, just like him. So, Kanhaiya instantly became very enthusiastic! And in this new state of mind, I first composed myself and put on a brave countenance, as if there was nothing special about Jarasandha's army. In fact, I dispatched ten additional spies to get a minute-by-minute update of the sleeping habits of Jarasandha's army. The reason behind sending these spies was simple; our morale would remain high, only if the one who had devised the strategy displayed plenty of enthusiasm. If he himself appeared as if he has lost his courage, then it was just a matter of time before everyone followed suit! So, in order to ensure that their enthusiasm persisted, I ordered everyone to conduct a final review of their respective tasks. Everyone set about reviewing their tasks, while I joined grandfather and the commander-in-chief to wait for the next update from our spies.

Meanwhile, soon after Jarasandha's army had set up camp on the outskirts of Mathura, he addressed his army in a booming voice and thundered, "Surround the entire city of Mathura! Station the catapults on high ground and pound the city with boulders when the battle begins! Tomorrow morning, as soon as the battle begins, rain spears and arrows on the enemy. Destroy the entire kingdom of Mathura! And, as soon as you set your eyes on those two boys, Krishna and Balarama, pierce their bodies with thousands of arrows, and let the war continue till they are dead!" Jarasandha's fiery speech came to an end on this note. Since everyone was exhausted after the long march, they rested the night to recoup their energy. In other words, apart from this speech, nothing

special occurred in Jarasandha's camp that night as was expected. We too heaved a sigh of relief that at least the first night had passed with no untoward incident!

The action began early next morning. With their morale high, Jarasandha's army was up and ready at the crack of dawn, and got into attack formation mode; but Mathura's army had yet to make an appearance. Even after the sun shone brightly overhead, there was yet no sign of the arrival of Mathura's army. Jarasandha was utterly baffled; until now, all the battles in Aryavarta were fought according to the traditional rules of warfare. The army of the kingdom under siege would arrive at the outskirts of its kingdom to keep its citizens and the kingdom away from the war. But this time, Mathura was fighting according to my battle plan; so, some traditions were bound to be broken!

Unaware of all this, Jarasandha spent the entire day anxiously waiting for Mathura's army to arrive. But there was no sign of its arrival, for how could it arrive? After all, this was part of my strategy. As a result, one entire day was wasted. Now, the enemy had no alternative but to retire for the night. They peacefully did so, except for the fact that Jarasandha was restless throughout the night. And ultimately, the poor king concluded that Mathura's army may not have been prepared for battle the previous day, so it did not arrive. He was certain that it would show up the next morning.

Nevertheless, dawn was not too far away. Soon, it was daybreak and Jarasandha's army once again gathered, but still, there was no sign of Mathura's army! Now, Jarasandha, who had barely slept the previous night, lost his composure. Did you notice how my battle plan had worked! It had pushed Jarasandha, the enemy's driving force, into a miserable state of mind in the initial days of the war itself! It had made him spend a sleepless night, leaving him disoriented. The next day too, Jarasandha's army waited under the scorching sun throughout the afternoon wearing heavy armour, and soon that day too came to an end. Meaning, Jarasandha's second night at Mathura's gates was also spent in frustration, tossing and turning all night. It was only on the afternoon of the third day that Jarasandha finally came to his senses, and he then ordered his army to march into Mathura and attack. Now as you well know, this was easier said than done. You are already aware that all the lanes of Mathura had been narrowed down to treacherous, mud-filled, tiny alleys. The roads were strewn with stones and thorns and the ground was bogged down with slush. Meaning, all arrangements had already been made to ensure that Jarasandha's army could not enter Mathura easily. And this strategy immediately began to bear fruit as well. The evening had set in and still, not a single soldier of his massive and well-equipped army had been able to enter the city of Mathura.

We had ensconced ourselves at the palace itself, taking note of all the information brought to us by the spies. Naturally, we could get involved in the battle only after Jarasandha managed to find some way out of his troubles. Jarasandha's failed attempts at entering the city had lifted the spirits of the people of Mathura. Overjoyed at this victory, grandfather hugged me right in front of the entire court. To tell you the truth, it was the first time that he had really begun to believe that Jarasandha's attack could indeed be repulsed. On the other hand, the entire city of Mathura also echoed praises for my battle plan. By nightfall, the mood at the royal palace's garden had become one of jubilation. People everywhere were praising me. Indeed, they were queuing up to congratulate me! The atmosphere was so charged with jubilation that it seemed as if we had already won the battle. Everyone was so enthusiastic, that later the same evening, some youths, led by me, set off for the banks of the River Yamuna, carrying cymbals and hand drums, where a large number of people, especially women had taken shelter. Some had taken shelter under the trees in the open and others in tents. They too were immensely relieved on seeing our enthusiasm.

Jarasandha's camp, on the other hand, remained deeply perturbed all night long. Discussions were held late into the night. This is the benefit of doing something unexpected. All the energy of the enemy gets drained in thinking. Jarasandha's army and its allies, with great difficulty, had managed to reach Mathura, after a long, exhausting march. Added to that was their all-night vigil for the last two days. Moreover, the third day too had passed uneventfully. Three days had elapsed, and there was still no sign of a battle. I was happy, the palace was elated, and the *Mathurawasis* were overjoyed, but Jarasandha was driven insane! His allies, the kings were restless! And their army, bewildered!

Well, anyone could have guessed Jarasandha's plan of action for the fourth day. Indeed, there was no ambiguity about it given the circumstances; they had no option but to enter Mathura. Thus, after a pre-dawn, morale-boosting speech by the great Jarasandha, the army got down to the task at hand. But how would that help? They still had a lot of nasty surprises in store for them. Even those tasks which would normally have been very simple to do had become extremely arduous due to the numerous obstacles we had strewn on their path. Meaning, they still had to grapple with Kanhaiya's strategy. So, even though they advanced with due ceremony and force on the fourth day, at the end of that day too, the entire army, comprising three hundred chariots, scores of bullock carts, thousands of elephants and horses, spent the entire day trying to enter Mathura! And soon, the fourth day too had run out on them. All their efforts had come to naught even after four days! Seeing the unconventional way

in which his army was being harassed, he became insane with fury. For the next few days, this became a daily routine for Jarasandha's army and seven days in total were wasted thus. With the passage of each day, Jarasandha's frustration multiplied and on the other side, praises for me continued to increase. The roads had been narrowed down to such an extent, that it was impossible for the chariot and bullock carts to enter Mathura. Therefore, they could now rely only on the horses and elephants. Well, we had made arrangements for them as well! The slush and slippery clay which the roads were strewn with made it impossible for the elephants and horses to get a firm footing, and they kept losing their foothold while trying to enter Mathura. So, now they had to depend on the foot soldiers alone. Incredibly, it had taken them a whole week to realise this fact. And as for the foot soldiers, strong preparations had been made to take care of them too! Apart from slippery roads, sharp stones and thorns had also been strewn on the path for them. All in all, it was not so easy for the foot soldiers to enter Mathura either. But whether it was easy or not, efforts from their end had certainly begun. And after persistent struggle, some soldiers had even succeeded in entering the lanes of Mathura. However, here too, they faced misfortune. For, everyone including me, was ready and waiting hidden in the houses along the way to engage with them. So, even if a couple of daredevils did manage to enter Mathura by chance, the poor men would fall prey to this guerrilla strategy of ours. Our soldiers, hidden on the rooftops of houses and in the by-lanes, could easily kill them from a distance. This same scene played out for the next three days. Thus, even after the passage of ten full days, Jarasandha was still struggling with all these obstructions; he had still not managed to enter Mathura!

When even after ten days, Jarasandha was still unable to hurt even a fly in Mathura, a festive atmosphere broke out in the city. Kanhaiya and his astute battle plan were all that the people discussed. People were so overwhelmed with enthusiasm, that there was even a procession taken out in my honour! But we still had to face many difficult and dangerous situations in the days to come. Therefore, I remained grounded and calmed everyone else too. Just because our plan had succeeded so far, it did not mean that we had won the war. Jarasandha had not returned to Magadha. He was still lingering on the outskirts of Mathura like a predatory leopard and desperately trying to enter the kingdom. Well, these were our thoughts at that time. As for Jarasandha, he eventually realised that it was impossible to enter Mathura without clearing the streets of the hindrances we had strewn on it. It also dawned on him, that this was all a part of a sinister battle plan of ours. He made his decision, and they spent the next two days clearing the streets. They flooded the streets with torrents of water. It was good! They were, after all, wasting all their precious supplies of water in the process.

Meanwhile, four separate regiments of their army had been assigned the task of clearing the stones and thorns from the roads. Truly, this appeared to be an entertaining scene for us. We were thoroughly enjoying ourselves, watching the scene hiding on the rooftops of the houses. I was enjoying it so much that I cannot even describe it! They had come strutting to ceremoniously wage war against Mathura, but alas, here they were, clearing and cleaning the streets! I said to myself, 'Wow Kanhaiya! What an intelligent strategy you have devised! You have shrewdly made the combined army of Aryavarta's greatest kings clean the streets of your kingdom!' What can I say? I felt so proud of myself, that I patted my own back a number of times during those glorious days.

However, this scene too played out after some time. For, on the thirteenth day, Jarasandha's army was finally able to enter Mathura as the hindrances were removed. But it was of no consequence as bhaiya and the commander-in-chief's regiments were stationed there, ready to give them a bloodthirsty welcome! Though the streets had been widened, the slippery clay was still not completely removed. So, the chariots kept slipping repeatedly. Many a times, the foot soldiers were being injured by their own chariots. Nevertheless, they had now managed to enter the city of Mathura, and now as they were in Mathura, a battle was inevitable. Soon, a terrible fight ensued on the streets of Mathura; but no matter; we were not exactly fighting an open battle; our army was hidden in various houses. As a result, Jarasandha's army was going berserk just trying to locate our soldiers. First, they had to search for them and then engage in a battle with them. Fed up with our tactics, the enemy soldiers started venting their anger on the houses. In a short while, they had razed many houses to the ground. There was nobody actually living there, therefore, at least no lives were lost; but yes, they were certainly damaging the property. All in all, my way of combating with them was severely testing Jarasandha's patience and that of all the kings who had joined forces with him. They had to fight a three-pronged battle with us. Firstly, they were still struggling in the narrow lanes and slippery roads. Secondly, they had to fight a face-to-face battle with bhaiya and the commander-in-chief's regiments, who stood their ground courageously. And thirdly, they had to fight with an invisible enemy that attacked them stealthily from their vantage points which were located in the houses, rooftops and also the by-lanes! As a consequence, their increasing woes had gradually begun to drive them insane. First of all, they had reached here after many months of marching, facing a lot of hardships along the way. The march must have already taken much longer than expected because of the number of elephants and foot soldiers in the army. And the last straw was that instead of battling with a proper army on an open battlefield, they were coerced to engage in such menial tasks. What they came

here to do and what they were doing was a far cry from each other.

They had anyway persevered and forged ahead, in the hope that sooner or later, they would get the opportunity to engage us face-to-face in battle. Seeing their determination, it did not seem as if that day would be too far either. For how long can one try to avoid the inevitable? Finally, one day, bhaiya's regiment and Jarasandha's army did clash in a fearsome and pitched battle. Also, the next day, the two of them soon found themselves engaged in a terrible one-on-one combat. Now, as you well know, both of them were masters at fighting with the mace.⁷ Rather than focussing on victory or defeat, both Jarasandha and bhaiya were actually enjoying the fight! As soon as it was dawn, they would commence their combat and continue fighting through the day, only to stop with the greatest of reluctance at sunset. And interestingly, they were battling at a vast and major crossroad, where coincidentally, we were hiding in nearby houses. We would pounce on anyone who passed by us; and whenever we found the opportunity, we would enjoy watching the fight between bhaiya and Jarasandha.

On the other hand, around three hundred soldiers of Jarasandha's army were engaged in a battle with the commander-in-chief's regiment at the parallel crossroad. Meaning, all in all, there were skirmishes being fought at almost every crossroad of Mathura. However, compared to these battles, bhaiya and Jarasandha's fight was a class apart. Truly, both bhaiya and Jarasandha were expert mace fighters. As soon as they began fighting, everything else would appear to have come to a standstill. Everyone would become absorbed in watching their battle. The fight was even more pleasurable to watch because both of them contentiously observed all the rules of fighting with the mace. And indeed, because of this, their fighting style had risen to an art form. What can I say of others; I too felt blessed as I watched the unforgettable clash of these two mighty warriors. I had never thought that combat with a mace could be so graceful. It seemed as if two mighty mountains were colliding with each other, on the heels of a well thought out strategy. I considered myself very lucky to have had the opportunity to witness such a great battle.

Apart from this prolonged duel between bhaiya and Jarasandha, there was another cause for worry as well! Taking advantage of this duel, Jarasandha's forces were now rapidly gaining ground. Even the commander-in-chief's regiment could no longer hold their positions. And gradually, the situation had become so grave, that even the rest of us had to abandon our guerrilla warfare and confront the enemy in the open. Thus, while bhaiya engaged Jarasandha in one-on-one combat, the rest of us were using all our combined forces to battle with Jarasandha's huge and powerful army. One day, during the battle, I

suddenly found myself facing Rukmi's regiment. On seeing him, for a moment, I felt bewildered. Why was he here? In my heart, I felt, 'Why is he fighting from the enemy's side when he is my brother-in-law?' On the other hand, Rukmi became enraged upon seeing me. In fact, he was so furious that he pounced on me the moment he saw me. Clearly, his old wounds were still smarting, but what chance did he have against a great fighter like me? I had defeated him and had him at my mercy not once, but twice, and each time, without knowing the reason, I had let him go unharmed. Perhaps, even my wounds were still fresh! You might recall how displeased Rukmini had been the last time, when I had landed just two kicks on him! I thought, 'So, what if I were to wound him now?' But a voice within cautioned me, 'Oh no! Never! Never!' At no cost was I willing to displease my Rukmini, who was dearer to me than life itself. But alas! If only Rukmi would understand this fact! The situation was such that whenever thoughts of Rukmini crossed my mind, I would spare Rukmi; and he was so shameless, that he would keep returning and fight with me repeatedly. Is it not said that you have to face the repercussions of your deeds right here in this world? That was why Rukmi was persistently testing my patience, just as I was testing Jarasandha's. Meaning, just like Jarasandha and bhaiya, Rukmi and I were also locked in a long-drawn-out battle. Neither was the battle between Jarasandha and bhaiya coming to an end, nor was the battle between me and Rukmi seeming to end anytime soon.

In fact, an end to this huge war was nowhere in sight either! Around twenty days had passed since the battle had begun and yet, there was no major defeat or victory. The good news was, now the scarcity of food and water had begun to take its toll on Jarasandha's army. The supplies that they had brought with them had all but run out. They had no clue that the water in the nearby wells was poisoned and full of thorns, and that the forests around them had been ruined. In fact, they never anticipated that the battle would last so long. By now, some regiments of the armies allied with Jarasandha's army had even begun to come close to the royal palace of Mathura. But fortunately, their number was not large enough to pose a serious threat to the palace. Meanwhile, the good news was that by now, most of the kings accompanying Jarasandha were tired of the fight. Well, to begin with itself, they had had no great interest in the war. They had been drawn into the fight reluctantly because of Jarasandha's power and influence over them. So, it was natural that they would get exhausted quickly. On seeing all these subtle signs, my optimism was at its peak. And once I was inspired, my adroitness increased manifold. My hopes were also rising because of the successes which we were notching up, one by one. As a consequence of this high morale, I suddenly thought of a devilish scheme: 'Why not set fire to

the carts that contained their remaining supplies?’ Then they would have neither food nor water and they would thus be forced to retreat. But there was one hitch in this plan. It was not possible to carry out this sabotage during the daytime; and to do so at night was against the principles of war. So, to find a solution to this problem, I discussed this plan with the king and the commander-in-chief. However, both of them were horrified on hearing it. They strictly forbade me from doing anything that was against the set principles of warfare. Deep in my heart, I was incensed. I chided them mentally, ‘Then why were you fighting this war according to my strategy? You should have gone to an all-out battle with Jarasandha, following the conventional rules of warfare. Within just two days, all of you would have been wiped out along with all your ethics of warfare!’

Anyway, I accepted their views and pretended as if I was going to obey their command. But in reality, I was helpless because of my nature. I was not one to follow any rules or obey anybody’s orders. You are very well aware that I was a slave only to my own decisions. And the command of my mind was clear - death was staring us in our faces and we had to save ourselves at any cost. So, at night, along with my regiment, I reached the ground where the enemy had set up camp. The torches were burning, but the enemy soldiers were sleeping. Not more than twenty to thirty soldiers were standing guard, and that too, outside the tents of the kings. From a distance, we could already see twenty to thirty carts laden with food and water, standing at a distance from the tents. There was no obstruction, so we raced towards the carts, crouching in the darkness along the way, and set them ablaze. Obviously, Jarasandha was infuriated with this unexpected attack on his army’s food and water. No matter; getting enraged is, after all, a sign of a helpless person. So, let us forget about him; what was interesting was the consternation of the accompanying kings when they witnessed this scene. Needlessly harassed for the past three months, they now seemed unable to endure the additional pressure of this food shortage. The gravity of the matter was understandable. They had journeyed for two months under arduous circumstances; on top of it, they were struggling in Mathura for the past month. Moreover, they still had to cover the long and arduous return journey home. Not only were the kings mulling over this, but now, even the army was in no condition to be pressurised to fight an extended battle. After all, for how long can anyone fight without food and water? Meaning, Jarasandha was harried, the army, confounded and the accompanying kings, perplexed! Finally, after twenty-seven days, Jarasandha was compelled to stop the battle and retreat. It was as if a grand wedding procession had to return without even setting their eyes on the bride! With this retreat, the biggest calamity ever to bear down on Mathura was forestalled. At the same time, my death, which had

seemed almost certain, was also averted.

This development obviously created a festive atmosphere across Mathura. There were celebrations and merriment everywhere. The royal palace shone like a jewel, its every contour highlighted by thousands of lamps. At night, the flaming torches transformed the royal palace, lending it an ethereal, dreamlike appearance. As for the garden adjacent to the palace, it seemed to be besieged by torches. What was even more special was that people were singing my praises everywhere. My name resounded all over Mathura, so much so, that it had become a routine for the youths to daily seat me on their shoulders and take me out in a procession through the city lanes. At any given time, about a hundred youths would arrive with hand drums and kettledrums, seat me and bhaiya on their shoulders, and then carry us through every street of Mathura, singing and dancing all through the way. Wherever our procession went, crowds would cluster on both sides of the road and on seeing us, they too would start shouting our praises. As for us, we ‘cowherds’ would feel deeply honoured on receiving this love and respect.

Putting all this aside, let me reveal an absolute secret to you. Though all of Mathura was delighted, grandfather was the happiest and his joy was special. Because it was he who was most afraid of Jarasandha. This was because the old wounds that Jarasandha had inflicted on him were still quite fresh in his mind. Therefore, the fact that Jarasandha had to return empty-handed was a big accomplishment for grandfather at his age. Besides, it was also certain that after this victory, his reputation across the entire Aryavarta belt would be significantly enhanced. And as for me, all this was like a dream. Everything was transpiring so rapidly in my life after arriving in Mathura, that I often had trouble believing that it was all real. Still, it was true that after coming to Mathura, the ‘Kanha’ of Vrindavan had transformed into ‘Krishna, the supremely valorous!’ My condition was such that on one hand, while I was thrilled by the honour I was receiving, on the other, I could not resist feeling a little proud of myself. And I was so deliriously happy that it was impossible to contain my happiness. Many a time, I had killed animals and defeated death in the guise of demons; I had even escaped Nature’s wrath by strategically moving from Gokula to Vrindavan; but this time...

I had made the greatest allied army of the Aryavarta belt tuck tail and flee! Tell me, who would not be pleased with such spectacular accomplishments? Besides, my self-confidence was growing by the day, with a series of victories as a consequence of making the right moves. To be honest, I felt invincible because of my increased self-confidence. I generally enjoyed winning; it was just not in my nature to accept defeat. And why should I accept

defeat anyway? After all, life is just another name for ‘victory.’ I felt it was alright for me to feel extremely confident, as it was natural considering my victories. But soon, due to the immense joys my victories brought me, my mind started to indulge in flights of fancy. And, as you well know, during these days, all my daydreaming revolved around Rukmini. Then I thought, ‘Since I have attained so much success in life and have never had to face defeat even once, sooner or later, I should be able to win over Rukmini as well... my very own Rukmini. Why do I say ‘should be able to win’? If Rukmini had actually seen the impact of my strategy in this war, perhaps she would have instantly agreed to settle down with me in Mathura!’

Now, whether I gave free rein to my dreams or not, the reality was that I was continually discovering newer and newer competencies. This for sure was the result of my flowing with the tide and heeding my own counsel. Truly, if one observes closely, one will find that Nature has endowed man with many such wonderful powers and innumerable opportunities! And yet, man takes scant interest in awakening these latent strengths. I began wondering as to what thoughts prevent him from giving free rein to his potential and letting it spring forth. Actually, what can a man not do if he wants to? Look...what happened in my case. What a fantastic war strategy I had devised! Didn’t the invincible army of Jarasandha feel compelled to return without gaining victory, solely because of me? In fact, I would say that every human being is born with immense potential and many such similarly wonderful skills. True, some have more of it, and others a little less; some have it in one field, while others in a different one. But the question is not about the amount of talent one has, nor is it about the field in which the talent lies. It is all about realising and honing the talent that one has. Then, whatever the potential may be, no matter how much it is or in whichever field, what difference does it make? Though I have explained everything in the *Gita*, whenever I get the opportunity over here, I do not shy away from explaining it. I just wish that your life is full of splendour and glory, and you set forth on the path of progress.

Nevertheless, I seem to have digressed, as I have bragged quite a bit about myself and expressed quite a lot of my thoughts. Now, let me take my story forward and talk about the prevalent situation in Mathura. The victory in the war was now in the distant past. The situation in Mathura that I was witnessing, made it clear that it was only now that the kingdom would face its real challenge. For, most of the houses were partially damaged and many homes were completely destroyed. So, our first priority was to construct shelters for the people who lost their homes. The next was to repair the roads that were completely ravaged. Besides which, the other problem that we faced was the

scarcity of food and water, which we had invited upon ourselves. We had not only polluted the water in all the wells which therefore was not potable, but had also destroyed the forests all around. Meaning, now we ourselves were caught in the trap which we had set for Jarasandha! This, incidentally, is Nature's way of imparting justice, so how could we prove an exception to it? Thus, summing it up, Mathura had not been conquered but life here was in shambles. The problem of housing and food had assumed gigantic proportions. Moreover, the treasury, which was not too much to start with, was now completely empty. To add to the woes, Mathura had lost around three hundred soldiers. Such being the case, how would one help another? Every person was wounded and thirsty, and the hardships were such that they defy description. The heady feeling of victory evaporated as soon as reality sunk in.

But I was not like the others. I was a true *karmaveer*—a believer in action. The thought of conceding defeat never occurred to me. No matter what form the problem assumed, I considered it my duty to confront it. So, naturally, I assumed the responsibility of bringing Mathura back to normalcy. I immediately collected a few young men and began to deal with the problems at hand. We toiled day and night to first clean the wells, and then repair the roads to some extent. Gradually, we also began the task of repairing all the houses. But unfortunately, even after working hard for many months, we were unable to bring about enough improvement in the conditions of Mathura. In spite of continuous hard work, the gaiety of Mathura's marketplaces could just not be restored. Hunger and disease were stealthily stalking every home in Mathura. However, while dealing with all these problems, I had clearly realised one thing. With a good battle plan, one can avoid defeat and win the war. And if one's strategy is right, it is also possible to reduce the damage resulting from the war. However, one cannot fully escape the devastation that war brings. Meaning, devastation is the unavoidable outcome of any conflict. At present, I could clearly see that war is the clash of two egos, the price of which is paid by thousands of innocent soldiers and millions of citizens who suffer in its aftermath. What is the use of such ego if it destroys all humanity? Honestly speaking, seeing the prevalent condition around me, I began to develop a hatred for war. Take this situation for instance; earlier, the unreasonable anger of my aunts and now Jarasandha's ego and arrogance had unnecessarily caused endless difficulties for Mathura.

Almost three months had elapsed since we began the reconstruction and rehabilitation activities in Mathura, and yet, there was no improvement in sight. The main reason for this was the fact that the royal treasury was empty. Moreover, local businesses too had been ruined. Thus, no new taxes could be

collected. If not more, this experience had at least taught me the importance of the royal treasury. Indeed, the biggest change that I had undergone after coming to Mathura was, that I had realised the importance of wealth. Well, maybe so, but in this boring routine in Mathura, some good news suddenly came knocking at my door. One day, all of a sudden, Uddhava landed up in Mathura. And amazingly, on seeing him, I recalled that a village named Vrindavan still existed somewhere on this earth! I had been so deeply immersed in the affairs of Mathura, that I had all but forgotten about the very existence of Vrindavan. The good news was that everything was fine in Vrindavan. Actually, Uddhava had been sent to enquire after us. Indeed, if not the inhabitants of Vrindavan, who would worry about their dear Kanhaiya? As for the situation in Mathura, did it require a mention? Uddhava, of course, was very happy to see me and bhaiya in fine fettle; but he was taken aback when he saw the devastated state of Mathura. This was certainly not the Mathura that he had seen on his earlier visit. While he was happy seeing the Mathura on his earlier visit, this time around the same Mathura saddened him because of the devastation. Meaning, all of man's emotions, be it happiness or sorrow, are relative. This, in turn, means, that if he stops these 'comparisons', then these emotions too would cease to exist, and thereafter, he would remain in a permanent state of 'joy.' However, right now, the conditions in Mathura were such that we had all but forgotten the meaning of joy. You don't need to look far to see what I mean; take our own business which was also a shambles. Bhaiya would toil all day long to bring it back on track; but when the entire city had been wrecked, what could he do? Nevertheless, I had even appointed Uddhava to assist bhaiya. Naturally, I was so wrapped up in the task of restoring and rehabilitating the city, that I had practically not found the time to even meet Malini. I could not do anything about this... this was what it was... and I accepted it wholeheartedly.

Chapter 3

Education

An Enlightening Phase

After relentless toiling for six months, life had begun to limp back to normalcy in Mathura, when once again the dark and foreboding clouds of misfortune began to hover above Mathura. It seemed as if a peaceful existence and a happy, carefree life were just not meant for the *Mathurawasis*! It is an accepted fact, that our destiny is shaped by our own *karma* or actions, and I can also say from my own experience, that it was difficult to find people as lazy as those of Mathura during that time! Thus, if you actually think about it, there is no such thing as luck. It is really a man's *karma* which determines the highs and lows in his life. You may wonder what new trouble reared its ugly head, which has driven me from anxiety to contemplation. Well, let me tell you, folks! I had gone to the marketplace with a few from my group of simple, unassuming youths, thinking that we would discuss how to bring back the lost gaiety of the marketplace. But as I reached the marketplace, a spy came running towards me. Taking me to a corner, he conveyed such terrible news that a shiver ran down my spine. The news that our spies had somehow brought back was that Jarasandha was on his way to attack Mathura again. Besides, this time around, he had vowed not to leave Mathura without killing Krishna. The spies had also ferreted out the information, that this time he was arriving with a smaller but stronger army. Moreover, he was bringing along food supplies to last them for at least three months. The news was indeed very frightening; it meant that Jarasandha would not leave until he had finally settled the score with me. He had learnt quite a lot from his previous defeat, and that too in a very short span of time. He may have, but the point to be considered here was that perhaps the citizens of Mathura were good for nothing and this was why they had to face difficulties repeatedly. But I was a *karmaveer*, a firm believer in action; then why did I have to face threats to my life time and again? It was perhaps to test my capacity for action. Encouraging myself with these thoughts, I instantly prepared myself for the impending war. Now, the first battle had not been an easy one either, but still, I had found a way out. So, this time too, some or the other solution to this problem would be found!

But these were my thoughts and reaction. When grandfather heard this news, his spirits sagged. He immediately called for a meeting of his council of ministers. I too was called for the meeting, as were all the Yadava leaders. Meaning, by the time I reached the palace after hearing the news, grandfather had already convened a meeting. Surprisingly, before grandfather and I could discuss this news, everyone else had also begun to arrive. Very soon, the

chamber where we had gathered was packed to capacity. Needless to say, the news had driven a shaft of unmitigated fear through the hearts of all the leaders present there. Or should I say that it had driven everyone into an abyss of despair. Now, despite our state of mind, the situation was grave and we had all gathered only to discuss it. So, the discussions began and after hearing the opinions expressed on the matter, one point that clearly emerged was that Mathura could not afford another war. Now if Mathura was not prepared to face a war, that was fine by me. I held my silence the whole time. There was nothing I could say, as I was the root cause of all this trouble. Once or twice, grandfather asked me for my opinion, but I did not break my silence. What could I do? What could I say? I would have spoken up if there was a solution, or if there was a battle strategy that I could suggest. But when Mathura itself was in no condition to go to war, then what was there to be said? However, the court found it difficult to bear this silence of their 'saviour.' On the contrary, my silence only aggravated the fear in the atmosphere. Well, was I panicking any less? But this did not mean that I should say something ludicrous. So, I refused to break my silence. Ultimately, the meeting got over without reaching any conclusion.

It was a strange situation. Grave trouble was staring us in our faces but there was nothing that we could do. For, Mathura neither had a huge army that could fight, nor did it possess adequate arsenal; neither did the people have the will to face war again and that too, so soon. The simple truth was, that *Mathurawasis* with me included had lost the war even before putting up a fight. I, who had never experienced defeat all my life, could not see any possibility of saving myself this time. In contrast to all of us, the only person who seemed to be enthusiastic for a fight was bhaiya. But his enthusiasm was based on his own fighting prowess; it was completely devoid of a clear understanding of the present situation! The reality was that Jarasandha could destroy all of Mathura in just three or four days' time. Well, no matter what the reality was, it was not something that could be accepted. I remained lost in thought all day long, worrying about it. However, what could be achieved by just worrying about the problem all day and night? It was pointless to take any step until Nature presented me with a viable solution. This was truly the greatest of all problems that I had ever faced in life, which seemed to have no solution; even a pitched battle or extensive strenuous effort seemed to be of no use in this situation. In other words, Kanhaiya, the lover of life, was certain to meet death now; it was merely a matter of time. Now, I could let time decide the outcome, as it was going to occur in the near future. But compelled by my nature, I simply could not give up hope. So, I still continued to think of a way out of the situation. To put it in brief, I could not embrace death before actually dying. Now my intent

was clearly in place, but what could I say, Nature did not appear to be satisfied with just this much. The problem was already insurmountable, standing as it were, at a point from where it could not be made more difficult, and yet, Nature, with all its evil intentions, contrived to make it even more menacing. Indeed, it seemed as if Nature had decided to put an end to the life of Krishna, who wished to always remain victorious. Probably, that was why I received news that not only sealed my fate, but also shook me to the very core of my being.

One night, after dinner, bhaiya and I were sitting outside in the veranda and chatting. Obviously, we had no topic to discuss other than Jarasandha, when suddenly Satyaki dropped by. No one had ever come so late at night to meet me at home. Let me tell you, he was the only Yadava leader with whom I had struck up a friendship. As for the other Yadava leaders, they could barely tolerate me. This was fine by me, but as soon as Satyaki arrived, he ushered me towards a corner, and there, he bade me to take a walk with him. I looked at him carefully; he appeared to be very nervous and worried. Now, seeing his anxiety, there was no question of my refusing his bidding. So, we set off for a stroll through some deserted lanes. What he told me that day pained my heart enough to equal a thousand wounds. I can safely say, that it was the first time that I experienced such immense pain, and it was so bitter, that it had no other parallel. Satyaki said, "On the insistence of the Yadava leaders, especially Satrajit, Kritverma and Shatadhanva, a meeting was convened at the royal palace. The objective of the meeting was to discuss the impending attack of Jarasandha. The entire council of ministers, all the Yadava leaders, including your Father Vasudeva, and Akrura were invited for this meeting. But you were deliberately kept away. Actually, your grandfather wanted to invite you to the meeting, but the Yadava leaders had pressurised him against doing so.

In the meeting, Vikadru⁸ spoke on behalf of all the Yadava leaders and presented a terse proposal. The gist of it was that everyone was aware that at present, Mathura was in no condition to fight Jarasandha once again. And he said, "We also know that Jarasandha does not harbour any enmity with Mathura itself. He is attacking us only because of his enmity with Krishna. Thus, there is only one way out of this problem: either we arrest and deliver Krishna to Jarasandha ourselves, or we should order Krishna and Balarama to leave Mathura for good. Either of these measures can save us from the imminent disaster. For, once these two leave Mathura, Jarasandha will no longer have a reason to attack us. He will most certainly return to his kingdom with his army. If thousands of lives can be saved by trading the lives of just two people, administrative prudence allows for us to do just that, regardless of whether the

two in question are related to the throne or not.”

I was stunned to hear this news. Blood seemed to have drained away from my body. I thought, ‘Oh you ungrateful people! Have you forgotten that it was I who had saved you from Jarasandha the last time? And now, at the first sign of trouble, you want to throw me out like a piece of garbage? Well, I was not referring to the Yadava leaders; they always had an intense dislike for me from the very beginning; but who would agree to their suggestions? The entire council of ministers is with me, not to mention father and grandfather as well.’ I immediately consoled myself with this thought. After all, Satyaki had not even completed what he was saying yet! However, all these were just reassurances that I was giving myself; in reality, I, who normally walked briskly, was finding it difficult to take even a single step at present. After a while, when I became a little composed, Satyaki took a deep breath and continued, “This suggestion stunned everyone in the courtroom, and they all fell silent for a while. But unfortunately, since no one could find any other solution to the problem, everyone gradually began to realise the wisdom in what the Yadava leaders proposed.” Saying thus, Satyaki fell completely silent. The import of what he had said and the subsequent silence made me palpitate. Along with Jarasandha, Mathura too was becoming my enemy. I stopped in my tracks and just stood where I was, rooted to the spot like a statue. The flurry of thoughts I had in my mind had completely ceased. My mind became numb, and I, unable to think of anything else, leaned back against a tree for support. Seeing me in this state, Satyaki felt bad and hesitated for a moment.

Well, what recourse did poor Satyaki have? Having already told me so much, he had no option but to reveal the rest of whatever had transpired. So, after being silent for some time, he placed his hand on my shoulder, and continued very sorrowfully, “Surprisingly, the first person to support this proposed course of action was your Father Vasudeva. Then gradually, the entire council of ministers, as well as Akrura agreed to the idea. Only King Ugrasena was stoutly opposed to this proposal. Besides, he was also extremely hurt by your father’s behaviour. But it was admirable of the king who continued to support you in spite of being the solitary voice of opposition to the idea. He implored the court, “We should not be ungrateful. This is the very same Krishna, who, with his bravery, had rid us of the despot Kansa and liberated Mathura from his tyrannical rule. This is the same Krishna, because of whom Jarasandha had to return empty-handed in the last war, and it was Balarama who stood up bravely against a warrior like Jarasandha and repulsed the attack.” Satyaki continued, “Even though King Ugrasena’s words were true, everyone in the court was so frightened that his words failed to have any impact on them.

Nobody was in the mood to budge from the position they had taken in agreeing with the Yadava leaders. Finally, seeing no other recourse, your grandfather clearly asserted that even if he had to die, he would never hand you two over to Jarasandha.” In a quieter voice charged with emotion, Satyaki went on, “Towards the end of the meeting, almost in tears, the poor king entreated in one last appeal, “Just think! These boys have stood by Mathura every time trouble has befallen us. Would it be fair to desert them in their time of trouble? And besides, we all know that Jarasandha holds sway over all the kingdoms in the Aryavarta belt. That being the case, just to curry favour with him, the kings of this region will hunt down these two brothers and deliver them to Jarasandha. It would be much better if we all unite and oppose his nefarious wishes. At least that way, we will all live together or die together!” But alas, the fear of Jarasandha had numbed the minds of all those present in the court to such an extent, that no one heeded the old king. Instead, everybody said that death was looming large over the heads of Krishna and Balarama. Why should they too sacrifice themselves unnecessarily? In the end, buckling under the pressure of the entire assembly, grandfather too had to give in. Besides which, grandfather has also been given the bitter task of ordering you both to leave the kingdom of Mathura at once. But yes, when and how this court verdict has to be conveyed to you will be decided by your grandfather, who has reserved the right to do so. So, it depends upon his judgement when and how he will issue this order to you. I have informed you about this in advance so that you will have time to decide where to go and how.”

Satyaki fell silent after saying this, but my legs buckled and I sat down with a thump, right below the tree on which I had been leaning. Poor Satyaki had also become quite deflated after conveying this shattering news to me. He too sat cross-legged in front of me. Indeed, every word uttered by Satyaki had inflicted a thousand wounds on me. I felt as if my heart had been blown to smithereens, and each piece was weeping an ocean of tears. I was neither worried about what would happen to us, nor was I worried about where we would go. It was the behaviour of everybody in the assembly that had shattered me. I was enraged by the selfish thinking of all the people who had pushed me into an abyss of despair. I had faced numerous difficulties all through my life, and I had always confronted them with exemplary courage. I had never ever felt daunted by any kind of trouble or danger, whether it was in Gokula or Vrindavan, whether I had to battle the serpent Kaaliya or Keshi, the demon, whether I had to fight a mad elephant or a wrestler such as Chanoor, whether it was a challenge such as having to rebuild Vrindavan or Mathura, or whether I had to clash with Indra or Jarasandha. I believed that as long as you were alive, difficulties would keep

coming your way. If you recall, even when I had been trapped on the poisonous hood of Kaaliya, and death was certain, all the cowherd boys were just standing at a safe distance worrying about me, on the banks of the River Yamuna. Meaning, even at that time, nobody thought of saving me. I had felt distressed for a moment, for the fact that nobody had stepped forward to save me. However, I had quickly consoled myself with the thought that they were very young and not very courageous. Not only that, also whether it was the pain of not being able to visit Vrindavan, or the pangs of separation from Radha, I had woven all these pains into the notes of my flute, and had managed to enjoy them as well; they too had never been able to weaken me. The case of Rukmini is evidence of this fact. She had cast such a spell on me, that without her, life had begun to lose meaning for me. It was natural for me to harbour such desires at my age, but I also knew that for a cowherd boy like me, winning her was nothing more than a pathetic dream. And having realised this, I had transformed the pain of her love into enthusiasm. And as you well know, from that day onwards, I had endeavoured to make myself worthy of her in every possible way. But at present, there was a reason why I was feeling shattered. This pain was different and the wounds were deep, for, the people who had inflicted this pain upon me at present were capable adults and also wise. Moreover, they were my very own relatives. This was the only reason that I, Krishna, who had not been exhausted even after a thousand ordeals, the one who had not been daunted by the looming threat of death every other day, the one who had not wept in spite of unending sorrows, was now so deeply shattered. Not only had I considered every troublesome situation faced by the royal palace as my own, but I had also always looked upon Mathura as my own city. And even then, they treat me in this manner...? I can understand if the others did that, but father, you too...? Did you save me for this day... so that you could hand me over to Jarasandha in the prime of my youth to be killed?’

Agreed, the pain was intense, but it was not the end of life, was it? I understand that the shadow of death was looming over us, but we could not die before death actually came upon us, could we? By now you must have at least understood that emotions such as grief, pain, anxiety and fear were not a part of my nature. In spite of all their efforts to bog me down, they could not stay in my mind for more than a few moments. Thus, to avoid the abyss these emotions were threatening to pull me into, my awareness immediately set off in a new direction. Whatever father had done was his problem; he had acted according to his nature. Why should I suffer the pain for his mistake? It was better to apply myself to finding a solution to the problem that was staring at me in the face. And if I could still not come up with a solution, then, at the very least, I could

enjoy life for the remainder of my days. As soon as this thought struck me, I got up, pulled Satyaki on his feet and we set off for home. After dropping me at my house, Satyaki left for home. While my carefree bhaiya was already fast asleep, I was the only one awake and mulling over this problem. I did try to sleep, but sleep eluded me. I did not want to aggravate my frustration by cursing anyone. So, I applied my thoughts in a positive direction; and the positive line of thinking revolved around pondering where we would go on being sent away from Mathura. We could think of going to any place we wanted, but could certainly not go to Vrindavan this time. Yes, it was situated a mere ten *kosas* (twelve kilometers) away. It was also a fact that everyone there was indeed anxiously waiting for me. But I did not want the lives of the innocent people of Vrindavan to be endangered just because of me. If I took refuge there, Jarasandha and his army would certainly reach Vrindavan in a trice, searching for me. But then, if we could not go there, where else could we go? We neither knew of any other place nor did we have enough money to go to some other place. As I thought about this, I suddenly burst out laughing. A voice in my heart whispered, ‘When you do not know where to go, when you have no money, when you also lack the resources to face Jarasandha in battle and have nothing to lose, why are you worrying unnecessarily?’ The voice in my heart was right; if there is a solution in sight, one can muster courage and face the problem bravely. But when there is no solution in sight, it is wise to leave the outcome to Nature and instantly become free from worry. Having said that, I must admit that this was the first time that I was confronting a problem for which I just could not find a solution. But since it was not in my nature to worry unnecessarily, I left the problem in the hands of Nature and became free of anxiety. And the moment I became free of my worries, I fell fast asleep.

The next morning, I had just stepped out of my chamber after completing my morning ablutions, when I saw bhaiya anxiously waiting for me in the veranda. As soon as he saw me, he beckoned me to come over. I walked across to him and sat down silently beside him, gazing at the hustle and bustle outside the veranda. He looked me over closely in his unique manner, and asked, “Why did Satyaki come yesterday?” I too, in my own style, smartly evaded the truth and told him, “Nothing much. He was feeling bored at home, so he had come here to go out for a stroll with me.” I ended the topic here as I did not think it right to worry or hurt him. I, especially, could never ever in my life reveal to him the truth about father’s role in this matter. It was likely that if he learnt of it, he would become angry and bear a lifelong grudge against father and the Yadava leaders. And I did not want that to happen under any circumstances. As for me, I did not have any grudge against anybody now. For, my consciousness had now

returned to its balanced state. I believed in learning from every incident in life. Even from this incident, I learnt what was there to learn. *‘When a person’s life is threatened, he does not bother about any relation or person, apart from saving his own skin.’* In which case, how could I needlessly bear a grudge against anybody? On the contrary, in my mind, I thanked my father and the Yadava leaders for having taught me this invaluable lesson.

Anyway, after having a bath, bhaiya left for the wrestling arena. I too had freshened up and was ready, but I was clueless about what to do and where to go. I did not want to mull over what had happened at the court, but there was nothing else to think about. The problem was difficult, and there appeared to be no solution to it. Death was staring us again in our face, and I could not find any escape. I had ample time at hand, but I was unable to apply my mind to anything. Under the circumstances, my flute was my only solace, the one thing that could help me in the present circumstances. The idea of playing the flute was very appealing, but to play it, I would have to wait till evening. After all, one could not play the flute in the afternoon, especially when Jarasandha was coming to play the song of my death! That would have only brought me ridicule instead of solace. People would have said that Krishna has lost his mind at the mere news of Jarasandha’s arrival. So, keeping control on this desire, I set off to meet Malini. Indeed, she went wild with delight on seeing me after so many days. So, I sat chatting with her and enjoyed her company till evening. As the setting sun cast its long, languorous rays over the earth, I boarded my chariot and set off for the banks of the River Yamuna. I stopped at the far end of the bank, perched on the back seat of the chariot, and coaxed a melody out of my flute. Now, you are familiar with the special quality of my flute. Its melodies reminded me of the fond memories of my life, which provided me instant freedom from all my worries. Along with that, its notes invoked golden dreams hidden in my mind, which made my present pain disappear in the blink of an eye. At this moment, I had eagerly taken refuge in my flute so that it would take me down the memory lane to the lovely *Kunj* (the garden), Vrindavan. Unfortunately, even the haunting melody of the flute proved to be ineffective in easing my pain on this occasion. No matter, there was always the River Yamuna, the gently flowing waters of which had always had a calming influence over me. So, I alighted from the chariot and began strolling by the river banks. At this moment, my mind wanted to be alone with the flowing waters of the Yamuna. Walking along the riverbank for a while, I wandered very far... far away from the hustle and bustle, so far, that nobody could see or hear me. Finally, I came to a tree at an isolated spot and sat beneath it for a while with my eyes closed. I calmed my mind, and having done that, I sat with my feet hanging in the waters of the Yamuna, and

felt completely rejuvenated in no time. Now, I did not know whether I was preparing to lose myself in the melody of my flute or whether I was just fooling myself in my uneasy state of mind. Whatever the reason, I put the flute to my lips, and gazing at the flowing Yamuna in front of me once again, I launched into a melody. At this moment, I was sitting gracefully, leaning back on a tree with both legs stretched out in front of me. As I was playing the flute, I soon began losing myself in its melody. And this time around, it did not let me down; its mellifluous notes instantly transported me back to Vrindavan. Mother went delirious with joy on seeing me. She was an amazing woman; I was a young man now but she still wanted to feed me with her own hands. She sat down to feed me butter with several pots at her side. I too was under the spell of my mother's love to such an extent that I polished off everything. In the meantime, the gopis arrived and after gathering around me, they all but physically carried me away to the forest. There they sang and danced the *Raasa* dance so beautifully, that I began to sway in bliss. I was feeling so exhilarated, that I refused to stop dancing even after all the gopis had stopped dancing due to exhaustion. On the other hand, the cowherd boys were going wild with joy. As soon as they woke up in the morning, they took me by my hand and whisked me all the way to Govardhana. There we began to play and race around; this time, they were losing out to me in every game, almost as if they had forgotten how to play! And what should I say of Radha! Even today, she had not changed a bit ever since the first day we had met. Sometimes, she would love me, and at other times, quarrel with me. Her love would suddenly turn into a quarrel and within moments, her quarrelling would inexplicably turn into sweet love. While praising me, she would suddenly switch to grumbling, and while whining away, she would end up loving me. She would sometimes glare at me for dancing with the gopis, and at other times, she would admonish me for going off to play with the gopas. As for myself, I was madly in love with Radha. I equally adored both her loving as well as her feisty fighting spirit. What a wonderful thing my flute was! What peace it had given me! I had lived such a wonderful life in Vrindavan, that even if Jarasandha were to come and kill me now, I would have no regrets.

With these thoughts, I had just stopped playing my flute, when all of a sudden, I began to feel restless, as if there was something that had been left undone; in no time sadness engulfed my mind. Then I remembered! I had met everybody but I had forgotten to meet my love, my very 'life'. Did you not understand? Rukmini! But was that the flute's fault? How could I meet her in Vrindavan? It was late in the night, but how could this tormented lover leave without meeting his dear Rukmini? The River Yamuna was flowing right in front of me, so I refreshed myself in the river and once again sat down under the tree

and launched into another melody. At present, even the flute seemed eager to fulfill every desire of mine. Perhaps, it too had realised that time was now short. Whatever the reason, this time, the flute immediately evoked thoughts of Rukmini. She arrived to dwell in my consciousness and now, it was my turn to speak. There was much that I had to explain to her and tell her. However, it was strange; instead of explaining, I ended up apologising to her! The apology was for the fact that this great trouble had intervened before I could make myself worthy of her. How could I establish my kingdom when I could not even save myself? The naïve Rukmini broke down on hearing this; I could not bear to see her weeping. Distressed, I began trying to pacify her, ‘Do not cry, silly one! Have faith in me. After all, I was born in prison. I had defeated death and escaped from the prison on the very first day of my life. All my life, I have been surrounded by danger. Indeed, I had been brought up under the very shadow of death. Defeating and conquering death has now become a habit for me. I will overcome this danger as well. Any day now, I will conquer death and present myself before you; please do not worry, my dear. As soon as this danger is averted, I will work hard and make myself worthy of you. Have faith in me; for sooner or later, I will definitely marry you.’ Hearing this, she laughed out loud, feeling very relieved indeed. Seeing Rukmini smile and so pleased, this cowerd boy felt so contented! How can I describe these feelings to you? I was so lost in this game, that it was now past midnight. Well, it did not matter; when life itself was engulfed in darkness, who cared whether it was night or day? Right now, I was enjoying myself. “Wow! My dear flute! You took me to Vrindavan and then you arranged a meeting with my dear Rukmini too! It is thanks to you that I continue to exist.” Saying this, I lovingly kissed my adorable flute. Now I was back to my normal self. I went home and slept, only to wake up at lunch time.

Indeed, my mind had become totally free of this great trouble after trying for just one day. When there was nothing that I could do, why worry unnecessarily? Now I had resolved, that during the few days that I was left with, I would live my life to the fullest. I would worry about it only when grandfather asked me to leave Mathura. When there was no certainty about the very next moment, why worry about the next day? Was I insane to do that? Of course, not! Since I now had no work, all I had to do was wait for grandfather’s summons. Meaning, all I had to do was to wait for the order that would herald my death. By way of living it up, I drank the cool sherbet prepared by Malini every day. Meaning, it was not that I was all alone. Malini’s massages would rejuvenate me every day, and for some more boisterous enjoyment, I would ride my chariot around the city with great gusto. And to find peace, every day I would go to the banks of River Yamuna, where I would sit and watch the river flow by.

Interestingly, three days had elapsed amidst all this activity, and I had still not received any summons from the royal palace. And surprisingly enough, though I met father every day, he was behaving normally as if nothing had happened. Probably, my acting skills had been inherited from him! However, I could not understand the absence of a summons from grandfather at this point in time. Perhaps, grandfather could not muster the courage to ask me to leave Mathura. But, I was no less astute; I had stopped visiting the royal palace as soon as I had heard this news. Why walk into the jaws of death of my own accord? My thinking was clear; it was better to let death approach me rather than heading towards it! In this way, I could at least postpone death for some time.

Although my death was getting deferred, it was still imminent. In such a situation, it was not easy to forget the people who were responsible for it. One thought that was still gnawing at me—even though I resisted it—was that the very same Mathura, for which I had fought for so long had not hesitated for even a second to disown me today, to save its own existence! It was so ungrateful of them! And if this was indeed the norm of this world, then in order to remain alive, I would have to elevate my stature to a higher level than that of Mathura. Well, I would do this too, but only if I remained alive. For, at this moment, death was close on my heels, so what was the point in building castles in the air? Besides, the question was whether there was something to be gained by it or not; after all, I could not ignore the reality, that it was death that I was waiting for. I had waited for death in many previous instances. Gradually, I had become accustomed to this torturous wait as well. But in this instance, the wait was different, for, the people bent on killing me were my own. Maybe so, but this wait too had come to an end, for I received a call from the royal palace after a few days. I was prepared and waiting to hear the order that would herald my death. I reached the royal palace, free from all anxiety.

But, wait a minute, what was this? Contrary to my expectations, grandfather appeared very happy. Perhaps, he was becoming habituated to giving me a surprise. On close observation, the happiness on his face today was indicating some news that could ensure my survival. If it were not so, he would have been gloomy and teary-eyed this time. To be honest, I secretly felt relieved on seeing him in this positive and exuberant mood. Still, I thought it would be better if I were to hear it from him, but that was only possible if grandfather began speaking. But he did not seem inclined to say anything, not yet at least. But, there was another surprise in store for me. It was not grandfather but some *Acharya* who was seated on the royal throne. I was witnessing such a scene for the first time; and even if I avoided thinking in that direction and focussed only on the present, nothing untoward could be discussed in the presence of such a person. Well no matter what, I had to first do my duty. I immediately went to my grandfather and touched his feet first and then the *Acharya*'s. Immediately after that, grandfather introduced the teacher as *Acharya* Sandipani. He had such a wonderful personality, that I found myself captivated as soon as I looked at him. Indeed, how much had I seen in life? This was only the second *Acharya* I was meeting; the first was of course, *Acharya* Shrutiketu. It was natural for me to be impressed. In fact, I was impressed by the entire scene, for, at that time, there was not a single soldier or servant in the court. The *Acharya* was seated on the throne and grandfather and I were seated on either side of him. Honestly speaking, this seclusion was arousing my curiosity. At last, grandfather broke his silence and addressed me, "*Acharya* Sandipani is currently one of the foremost teachers in the entire Aryavarta belt."

Saying thus, he became silent again. 'All right,' I thought to myself, and joined my palms in a *pranaam* (greeting with folded hands) once again. But deep down in my heart, I was getting very irritated. What grandfather had said was self-evident from *Acharya*'s effulgence itself. I thought to myself, 'But have you thought of the impending threat to my life?' Here, I was lost in my own anxieties and grandfather was blissfully lost in his own world! He was not paying any attention to my expressions. Instead, addressing the *Acharya*, he continued, "This is my grandson, Krishna who is gifted and highly courageous. There is no one more sensible than him in Mathura at present; he is as intelligent as he is brave. Indeed, he is the person who killed Kansa, and it was his crafty battle plans that saved Mathura from Jarasandha's attack." By now, I was even more exasperated. What was the point of discussing my bravery and wisdom at this point in time? If I was so brave, why was I being hustled out of Mathura? I was just beginning to think on these lines when grandfather surprised me yet again. To my absolute amazement, he made a humble request to the venerable *Acharya*.

Pointing in my direction, he said, “O respected *Acharya*! I know that he is past the age for formal education. But this child has been deprived of formal education as a result of certain strange circumstances in his life. Therefore, it will be a great favour to me if you accept this extremely talented boy as your student.” I was stunned and naturally so. In fact, not only me, even you would have been shocked had you been in my position. I had come here, fully expecting grandfather to ask me to leave Mathura. But he was making plans for my education under the tutelage of a great *Acharya* like Sandipani!⁹ Actually, I had realised long ago, that to presume anything about grandfather was an attempt to prove oneself wrong.

Well, I had certainly been proved wrong, but you cannot even imagine how happy this illiterate cowherd boy felt, on hearing that he was going to get educated. But alas, my happiness was short-lived. I could get educated only if I escaped alive from Jarasandha’s clutches, right? Now, grandfather was talking about everything under the sun, but he was saying nothing about the death which was stalking me. I was getting annoyed with him when suddenly my mind was caught up with another concern. ‘Grandfather is quite old. Could it be that he has forgotten all about Jarasandha? Yes, this is what must have happened; that is why he is feeling so pleased for no reason, and also daydreaming about getting me an education. He must have most certainly forgotten that he was to banish me from Mathura. It seems as if his love for me has unhinged his mind. Perhaps, this threat to my life has rendered him mentally unstable. The very fact that he has seated the *Acharya* on the throne in his place is proof of his insanity!’ While I was standing there with all these feverish thoughts scurrying about in my mind, *Acharya* had begun to scrutinise me in a rather grave manner. He looked at me very carefully; his gaze travelled over me from head to toe. It appeared as if he had taken grandfather’s words quite seriously. It was the first time in my life that someone was assessing me! Who would not desire to be educated by such a great teacher! Especially for me, a cowherd boy, it was akin to my dream of marrying Rukmini come true! And this was indeed so, but then, another miracle occurred. As soon as the thought of Rukmini crossed my mind, I too decided to play along with whatever grandfather and the *Acharya* had planned for me. Forgetting about the threat to my life, I surrendered to the dreams of becoming an educated man. I thought, ‘What is the harm in indulging in this madness which was giving me happiness for the time being?’ With that thought, I forgot everything and began feigning enthusiasm for the education I was to receive!

It was remarkable that on one hand, death was looming large before me, and on the other, plans were being made to carve a brighter future for me!

Certainly, in such circumstances, it is better to look at the brighter side of things; by doing that, one at least gets an opportunity to indulge in a few pleasant dreams. While I was lost in these musings, I wondered what the *Acharya* had observed about me that he too was lost so deep in thought. Oblivious to his mood, I stood there expectantly waiting for him to agree, as if I was really going to get an education. Fortunately for me, after thinking for a while, *Acharya* agreed to take me on as a pupil. I too pretended as if I was delighted on hearing this, and immediately touched his feet, seeking his blessings. Surprisingly, upon seeing that *Acharya* had agreed, grandfather literally jumped with joy and that too at his advanced age! And in his elation, he let slip a crucial piece of information. He said, “At least my Kanhaiya will be safe in your *ashram*¹⁰!”

Bewildered on hearing this, *Acharya* asked, “What do you mean?”

Grandfather’s statement came as a surprise to me too. Grandfather too realised that he had made a slip and *Acharya* had taken note of it. But as the *Acharya* was astute, nothing but the truth would suffice by way of explanation. So, grandfather apprised him of the situation arising out of Jarasandha’s impending attack. He said, “There is no doubt about Kanhaiya being gifted. It is also a fact that I would like to see him get a proper education. But my primary concern is to save him from the clutches of death in the form of Jarasandha, who is about to reach Mathura any time now to kill him. And as you know, it is forbidden for royalty to attack an ashram. That being the case, he will get educated in your ashram and remain safe as well.”

After saying thus, grandfather fell silent but continued to look at the venerable *Acharya* with hopeful eyes. *Acharya* first looked at grandfather, and then at me. I was pleasantly surprised; this was beyond belief! I had to admit that grandfather had indeed thought far into the future. And I, like a mad person, had been criticising him. I felt an outpouring of love from my heart for my dear grandfather, and simultaneously, I was also angry with myself. How could I have such ignoble thoughts about my dear, dear grandfather?! However, just then, I too began to look at *Acharya* with eyes filled with great hope. For, today this great man had the final say in whether I was going to live or die. After pondering over grandfather’s request for a while, he called me towards him and fondly stroked my head, as if he was blessing me, and said, “I consider it my sacred duty to educate the person who has destroyed a great sinner like Kansa!”

And thus, it was decided that I would go to the *ashram*; meaning, the tables had turned. Not only was I saved, but I was also being given an opportunity to receive a formal education. Naturally, it was a huge relief; the air was filled with joy! Thereafter, for some time, we also indulged in some random

conversations. During the conversation, a thought suddenly struck me; I was saved but what about bhaiya? Death in the form of Jarasandha cast a shadow over him too. I most certainly could not leave him here and go. Did this mean that we were back to square one? Oh no! I really hoped not! If *Acharya* agreed to take Balarama too, then everything would be all right. But how would that happen? I was so overwhelmed by *Acharya*'s personality that I could not summon the courage to ask him. Nevertheless, I had to, so finally, I mustered enough courage and requested him, "If you can please agree to take my brother Balarama too as your student, it will be a great favour to us. For, I have never ever been separated from bhaiya since my birth. He too is very clever and strong. He is so good at fighting with the mace that he engaged Jarasandha, who is a renowned mace fighter, for many days in combat, matching him stroke for stroke. He too needs the guidance of a great teacher like you."

This time, *Acharya* did not think for long. After just a few moments, he called me over to him and stroking my head, said, "I will grant your request, but you must know one thing. Discipline is of prime importance in my *ashram*. Until now, you two have lived a self-willed, independent and carefree life, so you may find my *ashram* like a prison." I smiled and said, "*Acharya*! You do not have to worry about that. As for the *ashram* being like a prison, I was born in one!" On hearing this, *Acharya* quietly smiled. Clearly, he was very pleased with my ready wit. Well, that he was bound to, but now, in a grave tone, he said, "Most of the students in my *ashram* are from royal families and they have been studying there for several years. To rise up to their level, both of you will not only have to work very hard, but you will also have to ward off any feelings of being inferior to them just because you are ordinary cowherds." What he had said was very pertinent, but I too had faith in myself; so, I spoke with great self-confidence, "With your blessings, we will not disappoint you."

Saying this, I touched the feet of both the elders and took their leave, for I felt that grandfather and *Acharya* had some private matters to discuss. Besides, I was dying to convey this news to bhaiya. Needless to say, my happiness knew no bounds. Not just me, even my chariot seemed to fly in the air! Until a short while ago, I had been fearing for my life, and now, the great Kanhaiya was all set to get a formal education, and that too at the *ashram* of *Acharya* Sandipani, where, let alone Jarasandha, not even his shadow could step foot! In short, Kanhaiya was completely safe now. For, as per the prevalent tradition in Aryavarta, any kind of attack by a king or any sort of violence in an *ashram* was strictly forbidden. That being the case, there was no question that a mighty king like Jarasandha would dare to break this rule that was prevalent across the Aryavarta belt. Really, with just one clever manoeuvre, grandfather had managed

to save my life, as well as set me on the path to progress. I would soon become an educated person and thus be able to take another step towards becoming eligible for Rukmini. Suddenly, my life was filled with the light of hope and happiness. Truly, the darker the night, the brighter is the morning, provided one does not abandon faith and hope during the dark phase!

I was completely enamoured by grandfather's uncompromising affection. This truly is what love is all about! It is not at all about exchanging sweet words and empty emotions. Love is an act which leads to an outcome filled with love. Grandfather knew that we would have to leave Mathura, but he was worried about where we would go. He was well aware that the entire Aryavarta belt was under the sway of Jarasandha, so no matter where we went, the situation would not be any different. Truly, when love is in the depths of one's heart, a way out from any difficult situation can always be found, just as grandfather's love for me had found a safe haven for us in the form of *Acharya* Sandipani's *ashram*. But, for the first time in my life, I felt like thanking Nature too. Grandfather had been racking his brains and spending sleepless nights wondering how to save me, when *Acharya* Sandipani coincidentally dropped in at the palace in Mathura. The idea of saving us in this inspired and ingenious manner, had emerged in the course of this apparently coincidental meeting.

When I conveyed this news to bhaiya, he did not appear to be particularly pleased at the prospect. He was not really interested in studying and also, he was of the opinion as to why he should be servile to anybody under the guise of discipline? Bhaiya was not aware of the decree to expel us from Mathura, which had been decided at the royal palace. Had he known this, his opinion would have been similar to mine. He would have realised that it was perhaps better to endure discipline rather than face certain death. Well, whether he realised it or not, I had to make him understand. Finally, after enticing him with a thousand different things, and showing him a rosy future, I somehow convinced him to accompany me to the *ashram*. I then sent Uddhava back to Vrindavan, and we began our preparations to leave Mathura. Actually, all I had to do was channelise my enthusiasm. Malini was very sad on hearing this news. It was the same old familiar complaint; meaning, her sorrow was also rooted in the pain of separation. I simply could not understand how two lovers could ever be separated. In my opinion, if it was possible to be separated in love, then it was not love, but merely a form of ego gratification.

After two days, we were to leave for *Acharya* Sandipani's *ashram*, which was called Ujjaini. I could hardly wait for these two days to come to an end. Still, I just had to somehow kill my time until then, and so I spent most of it with grandfather. Meanwhile, bhaiya was busy putting together all the things he

wanted to take with him. Taking advantage of this opportunity, I too made a long list of things that I wanted to carry with me, and handed it over to him. Who knew how long we would have to stay at the *ashram*? But as the saying goes, ‘a drowning man will clutch at a straw.’ This was precisely what happened with us as well. Brimming with enthusiasm, we quickly went to *Acharya* to tell him about our preparations, where we were caught unawares by his response. A single instruction from *Acharya* put paid to all our preparations. He specifically instructed us, that all we could take with us were two pairs of clothes, and any two other possessions that we liked. As soon as bhaiya heard this, he was stunned. For a moment, even I was taken aback. But we were helpless; for the first time in our lives, we were obliged to obey somebody’s orders. Earlier itself *Acharya* had prepared us mentally by saying, that if we wanted to stay in the *ashram*, we had to give up our freedom and accept discipline. So, I satisfied myself with the thought that the process of edification had begun from here itself. Naturally, I wanted to take my flute and discus weapon with me, while bhaiya wanted to take his mace and plough.

So, after hearing his instruction, we quietly slinked away from there. There were several other things that we had to do rather than being morose. So, putting it out of our mind, we absorbed ourselves in our tasks. We had just two days at hand, and there was so much to be done that there was no time to get involved with anything else. We still had to make some preparations, and we also had to spend time with grandfather. I had to take care of Malini and also take the blessings of my parents. More importantly, I had to convince myself that we were indeed leaving. But what say did I have in this matter? Life was taking such unpredictable twists and turns that it was taking me to one extreme one moment, and to another the very next moment! When I was expecting certain death, I was being imparted education! In such a situation, I had to repeatedly convince myself that all this was indeed happening for real.

How long were two days anyway? They whizzed away in farewells and meetings alone! We had to leave early in the morning on the third day. This meant that our departure was now confirmed. I was full of enthusiasm, and bhaiya, full of grief; we had reached the palace along with our parents as soon as the first rays of the sun lit up the morning sky. To our absolute amazement, a great number of *Mathurawasis* were already waiting at the palace to see us off. Seeing the large crowd of people, I became emotional; this was another example of a leap from one extreme to another. There was a time when I was to be banished from the kingdom, but instead, I was now being given an emotional farewell, and it was such a wonderful one too. Both of us standing in front of the main entrance of the palace, while around ten chariots stood facing us. About a

hundred strong crowd had gathered to see us off, which included Malini and Satyaki and several friends of bhaiya from the wrestling arena. We were still chatting when grandfather and *Acharya* emerged from the main entrance of the palace. As soon as they arrived, the fervour of the crowd increased. Indeed, everyone came running forward to take the blessings of *Acharya*. After a few final words with grandfather, *Acharya* promptly mounted the chariot. We too quickly took everyone's blessings, and walking behind *Acharya*, quickly put our belongings onto the chariot. This was the first time that I was experiencing such nervousness. I wondered, 'If this was the way things were going to be with *Acharya* in Mathura, what would it be like then at the *ashram*? I was enthused, but I wondered about how bhaiya felt, as he was reluctantly leaving Mathura. With all these thoughts flashing through my mind, I climbed the chariot with bhaiya, and as it lurched ahead, our journey to the *ashram* began. With the first spin of the chariot's wheels, our lives had taken a radical turn. We illiterate cowherd boys were off to receive an education along with the princes, and that too by one of the best teachers in the entire Aryavarta belt!

Our caravan comprised four chariots in all. *Acharya* sat in one while bhaiya and I sat in the other. And right before and behind us were two chariots, which carried the servants; these chariots were stocked with essentials needed for the journey. Well, we may have been cowherds, but grandfather had sent us off with the same pomp and splendour that was accorded to princes. I noticed that our beautiful caravan was now passing through the streets of Mathura. Sadly, since we had left at the crack of dawn, there was not much hustle and bustle on the streets. Meaning, the *Mathurawasis* did not witness the magnificence of the caravan of Krishna. No matter, at least the journey was magnificent, and it showed that my life had certainly progressed. Oh! The moment I thought of progress, I, the great Kanhaiya was once again lost in contemplation...Undoubtedly, it was not as if all this had happened overnight. Ever since we had arrived in Mathura, our lives had been set off on the path of progress. Not only did I have my own business in such a big city, but I was also a person who had a status and was well respected. I not only was the grandson of the king, but I was also his dearest and most trusted advisor, and due to this, I had become a respected citizen of Mathura. And one has to admit, that my actions and my understanding had played a significant role in the progress of my life.

Actually, I had made progress in several fields after coming to Mathura. More specifically, I had excelled in making new friends and in playing games. When I was in Vrindavan, all my friends were about the same age, but here, my closest friend was my grandfather. Meaning, all my friends in Vrindavan were

cowherd boys, but here, the king himself was my friend! Even the games in Mathura were different; in Vrindavan, I would play games such as hide-and-seek and chase, but in Mathura, I was enjoying the games of politics and diplomacy. In Vrindavan, my enemies were mad bulls, poisonous snakes and other wild animals. In Mathura, my enemies were the eminent Yadava leaders. Not just the Yadava elite, but even the most powerful King of the Aryavarta belt, Jarasandha, was now my personal enemy. Now tell me, who would not be pleased with such all-round progress that I had achieved? Other than this all-round progress, there were some more reasons to feel happy about this trip. The most important among them was that this was the first time since my birth, that I was going to lead a safe and secure life. At this point in my life, I was completely free from the shadow of death. So much so, that even if Jarasandha's army were to come face-to-face with us, they could not harm us, as we had now taken refuge with *Acharya*. In short, thanks to this journey, for the time being at least, we were free from all of life's struggles. As you well know, earlier I was always living in the shadow of death. It had relentlessly pursued me when I was in Vrindavan and then even when I came to Mathura.

Nevertheless, let me set these thoughts aside and move along. I was lost in this futile reverie, and in the meantime, our chariot had traversed the streets of Mathura and reached the highroad. I was like the proverbial frog-in-the-well, going out to explore the great wide ocean. Also, this was the very first time that we were getting an opportunity to experience life outside Vrindavan and Mathura. And more importantly, this was the biggest step that I had taken to make myself worthy of Rukmini. Think about it; how long would it take the talented Krishna to become worthy of Rukmini after receiving a royal education from the best *Acharya* in Aryavarta? Now, what do I hide from you, all this was possible only if I remained alive and got the opportunity, but even at this moment, my greatest happiness revolved only around Rukmini. Perhaps, it was my adolescent years that compelled me to think of her. Just then, another thought struck me and brought me back to the present, 'Come back, Krishna! Krishna! Please come back! You are lost in your thoughts again. You have set off on such an extraordinary journey! Why don't you enjoy the scenic beauty of the landscape?' No sooner had this thought crossed my mind than I became mesmerised by the beauty outside. We went through broad roads and narrow by-lanes; we passed villages and forests, crossed rivers and mountains. Like a small child, I was staring wide-eyed at everything, enjoying the picturesque beauty of the landscape as we travelled. But I was now twenty years old; not a child anymore. However, a person does not mature merely with age, but through experience. Therefore, as far as this journey was concerned, I was just like a

four-year-old and I was enjoying the ride exactly like a child of that age.

With just two days of travel behind us, we had established a daily routine. Every day after lunch, we would rest for a while, and every night we would set camp in a secure place; and the rest of the time would be spent in travelling. Things were proceeding smoothly so far, but on the third day, *Acharya* shook us out of the intoxication of our princely splendour. Thanks to grandfather, even though there was no shortage of servants, *Acharya* suddenly ordered that we should perform all our tasks ourselves. That is to say, our education had begun even before we had reached the *ashram*. So now, we not only had to go out and collect fruits for our meals, but we also had to wash our own clothes. This was the first time that we were washing our clothes. Naturally, bhaiya did not find all this very agreeable. I was afraid that bhaiya would create some trouble on account of this, so, when *Acharya*'s attention was not on us, I would quickly wash his clothes too. I thought if something went wrong and *Acharya* became upset with us, we would be forced to live in the shadow of Jarasandha's terror. No! Never! It was better to work twice as hard than face that situation!

So, I worked very hard and didn't attach undue importance to it; nor was there anything special about it either. The special part that I had observed on the journey was that the entire Aryavarta belt seemed to hold *Acharya* in high esteem. This was plainly evident from the fact that the kings of all the kingdoms we passed through would come to greet him. They would also bring with them an offering of sweets and savouries and other delicious foodstuff. However, this had a sad side to it as well; *Acharya* would not permit us to eat this food! We had to control our desire and eat only simple food.

More surprisingly, the *Acharya* would himself eat only the simple food that we ate. So, we accepted our lot, but when he distributed this delicious foodstuff among the servants and soldiers right before our eyes, it was too much to bear. They would all gorge on the goodies and we would keep gawking at them. Perhaps, this was what a good teacher was like. There was something to be learnt from every act of his. We would become inmates of the *ashram* when we reached there, but as far as I was concerned, my education had already begun. But I could see trouble brewing on the horizon as bhaiya was already upset. As the saying goes, 'a child's tendencies are displayed while in the cradle.' This was exactly what was happening with us now. It was already becoming quite evident as to what the future held for us at the *ashram*. Meanwhile, even as I was getting increasingly impressed with *Acharya* with every passing day, bhaiya's irritation with him was growing by the day. The key reason for his unhappiness was that he was not able to lay his hands on the

delicious food that was being freely distributed to others. One day, while we were chatting, he even said, “This *Acharya* appears to be a bit unhinged to me. He distributes even his own share of sweets to the servants! Now, who can explain to him, that delicacies were meant for the master and not for the servants?” Hearing bhaiya speak in this manner, I just smiled. I was trying to somehow maintain the peace. I did not want *Acharya* to expel us halfway through the journey. Although, it was not as if I did not understand bhaiya’s predicament. I knew that food was his biggest weakness, but the timing, opportunity and circumstances also had to be considered, right? For that matter, why just him? I was equally fond of food as well, but did that mean I should go around throwing tantrums? Agreed, savouries and delicacies were our greatest weakness; agreed that bhaiya was so fond of sumptuous food, that one could get him to do anything after feeding him well. But this did not mean that just for the sake of food, we could allow ourselves to become a meal for Jarasandha!

Anyway, bhaiya’s sulking every now and then, and me having to pacify him continued throughout the journey, and perhaps it would continue for as long as we stayed at the *ashram*. As for me, I had started to learn even from *Acharya*’s behaviour and his expressions. For this reason, I liked being with the *Acharya*; so much so, that now, I would often seek his permission and sit with him in his chariot. I had begun to feel as if, his mere presence was bringing some transformation within me. To tell you the truth, within just a few days of my association with *Acharya*, I had surrendered myself fully to his will. Even he was becoming increasingly impressed with me with every passing day. Now he seemed to take pleasure not only in speaking with me, but also in explaining many things to me. In short, there was a burning desire in both our hearts; in one, a desire to teach and in the other, a desire to learn. One day, when the weather and the atmosphere were both very pleasant, I was sitting with him in his chariot. It was afternoon and our chariot was traversing some forests. All of a sudden, I became curious about the education at the *ashram*. He immediately replied saying, “The princes studying at the *ashram*’s school are trained in two ways. On one hand, they are taught princely etiquette—how one can eventually become an exemplary king, the qualities required to be a good king and so on. On the other hand, it is my belief that as princes and kings, it is within their right to enjoy opulence and power. But ideally, a king has to be the greatest servant of his people. Actually, the king’s position is indeed that of a servant. Thus, even while enjoying the perks of being a king, he has to remain aloof and detached from it all. When required, he should be ready to live a simple and austere life, not just physically, but also mentally. For this purpose, apart from the other studies, everybody at the *ashram* is taught how to live a difficult and disciplined

life. The same way, a king needs to be an expert at wielding weapons, so they are taught to use weapons as well.”

Oh! So that was why we were being given such simple food, and perhaps why we were being made to work so hard. But we were not princes. It was not possible for us to live our lives without doing hard work. Similarly, we had the pleasure of feasting on special fare only when there was a festival or a big event; otherwise, we ate simple food. Then why were we at the receiving end of this cruelty? Well, I was just jesting, but actually, on hearing *Acharya's* words, I remembered what Rukmini had said. She had also mentioned that there were just three qualities required to become a good king; that he must be brave, empathise with his people and when the need arose, he should be able to live a hard life. And she had also pointed out that I already possessed these three qualities. Even I had started to believe this; indeed, how right Rukmini had been! Then a voice within chided me, ‘Well, if you really think what she said is true, then have you forgotten that she had also said that you had unnecessarily rejected the chance to become the King of Mathura, and that you would never be able to become a King again in your life?’ I retorted, ‘Well, so what, if she said that? I possessed the qualities needed to become a king and one day, I would certainly become one.’ The voice responded, ‘We value your resolve, but that will happen only if Jarasandha spares your life, right?’ I replied, ‘I will find a way out of that as well. I have never let even Nature stop me, so of what consequence were Jarasandha and Rukmini? And besides, I am in *Acharya's* company. Why should I even harbour such negative thoughts?’ At the moment, I wondered what else was there for me to learn at the *ashram* apart from the training in the art of combat. I had been living a simple life right from childhood. Thereafter, coming to Mathura, I had also been learning the qualities of a good king on a daily basis from my grandfather—the King of Mathura. So now, it was only a question of opportunity. Thus, now, not only did my confidence soar, but I had also clearly understood the gist of what *Acharya* had said. What he meant was, only a person who loves his people should be allowed to become a King. Only the one who has a burning desire to serve the people—and not just rule over them—should be king. Only the one who regards royal luxury and splendour as no more than just the perks of his duty, and is mentally always prepared to live without them, is fit to be a King. Only the one who can sleep on the bare earth, or go hungry if the need arose, could become a good King. Only the one who remained unattached to any of the comforts of living in a palace, even while actually living there, was fit to be King, like King Janaka.

What a strange person I was! Lost in all these deliberations, I did not even realise that it was time for the evening halt. Interestingly, as we were in the

midst of a dense forest and there were no inns nearby, this time, we set up camp near the edge of a small pond. The weather was pleasant and the scenery was beautiful, but we had to spend the night on rocky terrain. But we didn't mind, we ate some fruits, chatted for some time, and then dozed off. I lay down, after making a bed of leaves on a rock. *Acharya* and *bhaiya* also went off to sleep in a similar manner. *Acharya* slipped into a slumber as soon as he lay down. *Bhaiya* decided to spend this night fuming in anger; now I was the only one who was left. Well, even if I refused to pay heed to *bhaiya*'s boiling anger, how could I sleep? So, naturally, I got engrossed in my thoughts once again. Well, no matter which point I began my contemplation from, seeing *Acharya* lying down on a rock, it became clear to me why *Acharya* Sandipani commanded such respect in the entire Aryavarta belt, and why he was regarded as the best *Acharya* in the region.

Suddenly, my mind began to repeatedly ask me as to how did I, a poor cowherd boy, receive this opportunity to study under such a great *Acharya*. You are well aware that once my mind was stirred, it would love to get engrossed in analysis. So, it got busy analysing this situation and trying to find the reason behind this great development. Could one ignore the fact that my aunts' anger and Jarasandha's rage had also contributed to the present situation? Had they not considered me an enemy, would I have got the opportunity to be educated under such a great teacher in this lifetime? So, did it mean that whatever had occurred in my life had been for my ultimate benefit? If this was true, then whatever was transpiring now was also for my ultimate good. And if the two points mentioned above were also true in the case of every human being, then why does a person worry? Why does he remain unhappy? For, whatever happens in a person's life is bound to be for his ultimate good. This tentative conclusion sounded good to me, but the truth was that my analysis lacked the depth required to reach the core of such truths. Why should I lie? My intellect was not yet so evolved that it could comprehend all the mysteries of life. But this conclusion that I had arrived at, fuelled my desire to understand human life and get to the bottom of the mysteries of this giant universe. But since this contemplation was of a very deep nature, and also beyond my present level of understanding, I thought it best to put a halt to it for the time being, and instead focus my attention on trying to sleep. However, it was midnight by the time I nodded off to sleep. In the morning, having completed my daily routine, I went for a dip in the pond. *Bhaiya* and *Acharya* had a bath sitting on the edge of the pond. And after this, we resumed on the next leg of our beautiful journey.

We continued learning valuable lessons from *Acharya* on this wonderful journey of ours, even as we feasted our eyes on the scenic country side of the

Aryavarta belt. What did this region not have? Breathtakingly beautiful rivers, serene lakes, scenic forests, majestic mountains; all of them made this region very striking. As for me, as soon as the chariot began to move, I would lose myself in admiring the landscape. Finally, after journeying for ten days, we reached Ujjaini. At first glance, the city appeared to be very imposing. Although it was not as vast as Mathura, it was a better-planned city. From whichever path our chariot passed, people would start queuing up to take *Acharya's* blessings. Due to the crowded streets and the people repeatedly surrounding the chariot, the speed of our journey had obviously reduced considerably. Moreover, when our chariot passed through the marketplace, it almost stopped. It was just as well; at least this gave us the opportunity to properly look at the marketplace. Finally, we crossed by the marketplace too, and by evening, we entered the *ashram* compound. Most notably, the *ashram* was situated far away from the city, in an isolated location. Situated near the banks of the River Kshipra, this enchantingly picturesque *ashram* was nestled between the river at the front and a mountain range at the back. Truly, for *Acharyas* like Sandipani, there could be no better place than this for an *ashram*! It was quite big and well organised with seven chambers, one of which was for the *Acharya* himself. The second was the dining hall and the other five were for housing the students. Meaning, even in terms of facilities, the *ashram* appeared to be well-equipped. It was lush with greenery too, with huge trees surrounding it, making it appear almost as if it was located in the middle of a forest. Honestly speaking, as soon as I set my eyes on the *ashram*, I remembered Vrindavan. It was just as beautiful; but why just Vrindavan? Was it because I had spent most of my life there? Earlier, I smugly thought that Vrindavan had the River Yamuna, the Govardhana Mountain and the lake; could there be any other place as beautiful as Vrindavan? But after this ten-day journey, I had realised that Nature is abounding with beauty. It was not just Vrindavan that was so extraordinarily beautiful; there were scenic rivers and magnificent mountains everywhere. The Aryavarta belt was full of ponds and lakes, each one better than the other. Meaning, Nature had not been partial while doling out its spellbinding beauty. No doubt, the beauty of every place was unique...! 'Then why are you so partial to Vrindavan?' a voice within me quipped. Oh no! We had barely entered the *ashram* and see how I had already begun educating myself!

Well, on reaching the *ashram*, we had a bath first and then followed it with dinner. The entire responsibility of arranging the food was being shouldered by *Acharya's* wife, who was 'Mother' to all the students. In all, there were fifteen students in the *ashram*, including us. However, we had not formally met them as yet. That would happen later; for now, having had our dinner, we all

went for a walk. Perhaps, this was a part of the daily routine at the *ashram*. After the walk, we all sat in an open square in the middle of the *ashram*. *Acharya* and his wife sat in front of us on the raised platform that was built around the trunk of a huge tree. Sitting in this manner also appeared to be part of the daily routine at the *ashram*. It was only after all were seated that *Acharya* introduced us to the other students of the *ashram*. He began by introducing us to his wife, '*Acharya-mother*' and then the students. Just as we had expected, all the students were from royal families. But yes, there was one boy whose name *Acharya* had said was Sudama, who was the only one who did not have a royal lineage. They all seemed fine, except for two princes, Vinda and Anuvinda, who appeared rather snobbish. This was perhaps because both of them were princes of Ujjaini, and the *ashram* was functioning because of the grant given by their father, the King of Ujjaini. That may have been the case, but how did it matter to us? We had come here under *Acharya's* care. However, nothing special occurred that day. Perhaps, *Acharya* was tired just like we were; so, everybody soon slept. But yes, before retiring for the day, *Acharya* instructed all of us to assemble in the same place the next day at sunrise, after freshening ourselves up.

As soon as the day dawned, everyone gathered at the designated place. I had not been able to see anything properly the previous night, but in the morning, the square in the centre of the *ashram* appeared quite alluring. On the left side were the rooms, and on the right, there was lush greenery. From where we were sitting, we could see layer upon layer of mountain range decked in greenery, and behind us, we could clearly see the gurgling waters of the Kshipra River. Truly, there could be no place more beautiful than this, to get educated in. *Acharya* and *Acharya-mother* were sitting right in front of us on a stone seat in front of a tree. At a signal from *Acharya*, Sudama went and stood near him and started chanting the *Guruvandana* (an obeisance to the Guru). Perhaps, this was also a part of the daily routine in the *ashram*. Listening to Sudama sing, I felt the desire to play my flute. Perhaps, it was my ego that prompted me to flaunt my talent. Whatever it was, I immediately stood up and requested *Acharya's* permission to accompany Sudama's singing with my flute. *Acharya* happily consented to my request. Sudama's song and notes from my flute blended with each other so harmoniously that everyone was spellbound. From the next day onwards, this became the new daily routine at the *ashram*. Well, this was bound to happen. How could there be no positive change with Krishna around?

At the end of the splendid song and music, *Acharya* bade us to form three groups of five students each. I immediately took Sudama with me. For some reason, Vinda and Anuvinda also decided to join our group. Now the five of us were required to undertake all activities at the *ashram* together, which included

sleeping in the same room.

Chapter 4

Self-realisation

After spending one day at the *ashram*, it could be said that our education had formally begun. Until now, I had learnt only what life's struggles had taught me. Had I not got this opportunity to learn from *Acharya*, perhaps I would have been deprived of learning many things in my life. Truly, I will always be obliged to grandfather for providing me with this opportunity. As you know, my childhood had been blessed with abundant love from Mother Yashoda, and in my youth, the guidance of Grandfather Ugrasena had done wonders. Now under the tutelage of *Acharya*, my future too seemed to be heading in a promising direction. As I was thinking about this, my thoughts suddenly veered in an entirely new direction! I began to wonder how many teachers like *Acharya* Sandipani there were, and how many students like me were there who yearned to learn everything taught by their teacher. Perhaps, very few! I was proud of my craving to learn and internalise all knowledge from the very start of my education. And why would I not be? If I had been able to learn so much in life without a teacher, then you can imagine how a teacher like him could transform me.

I spent that entire day in getting to know everyone. Even so, I could say that this was one of the most important experiences of my life. It was just the second night at the *ashram*, when suddenly, an unexpected incident occurred. *Acharya* instructed all the students to sleep on the bare floor outside the chambers without any mattress. And surprisingly, even *Acharya* had come out to sleep without any blanket or bedsheets, and that too, on the bare floor outside his chamber. This was truly exemplary; really, if there were teachers like Sandipani and students like me, learning could continue all day and night! That is why I continued to observe *Acharya*'s behaviour very minutely. *Acharya*'s behaviour at present was teaching me that we should ask others to do only that which we ourselves have done, or are doing, or are capable of doing. All his actions, even the way he breathed and blinked were worth emulating. Gradually, I was

beginning to understand, that just by continually observing *Acharya*'s actions, one could learn more than what he actually taught. And the proof of this was that ever since I had met him, I was continuously learning something or the other just by observing him.

Now, let me tell you about the present unique experience, owing to which we are discussing all this. It was winter and the cold was unbearable since Ujjaini was located at the foothills of the mountains. Moreover, the *ashram* was on the banks of the Kshipra River, because of which cold winds would sweep through and freeze us to the bone. You can well imagine how torturous it must have been to sleep without any bedding on the floor under these conditions. However, it was *Acharya*'s explicit instruction, so seeing no way out, I lay down quietly on the bare floor. Bhaiya however, was extremely uncomfortable, and he kept tossing and turning in anger. As poor cowherd boys, we should have been accustomed to such hardships and should have been able to sleep on the floor without any difficulty. But what could we possibly do? We had never ever slept in the open without bedding before. Besides, we had never experienced such biting cold during winters either. Clearly, Ujjaini was much colder than Mathura or Vrindavan, and that was a fact. I too was finding it difficult to sleep and was a little uncomfortable. But the happiness I felt at obeying *Acharya* and following his instructions kept me quite composed. I could understand bhaiya and me feeling this way, but the plight of Vinda and Anuvinda, who had been studying here for several years, was not any different either. Indeed, in our group, there was just one fortunate person—Sudama—who had no trouble at all in slipping into a deep slumber the moment he lay down on the cold, bare floor. And, much to our annoyance, he even managed to snore away happily! Thus, amongst all of us, *Acharya* and Sudama were the only two who were actually sleeping, and the four of us were merely tossing and turning! Also, the rest of the students were sleeping peacefully in their own rooms, as it was only our group which had been blessed by *Acharya* in this manner!

Now, our chamber was the one in the corner, and to top it, the open veranda faced the Kshipra River; so, you can easily guess the extent of our discomfiture due to the chilly breeze from the river. Forget the others, even I was sleeping with my hands clasped between my knees, but still I was shivering due to the cold weather. Now, as I was unable to sleep, to while away time, I would steal glances at the others who were sleeping some distance away from me. It was then that I noticed that Vinda and Anuvinda had taken the bedding out from their rooms and were comfortably sleeping on them! I was shocked to see *Acharya* being disobeyed so blatantly. It had only been a few moments since they had committed this transgression, when, on seeing me and bhaiya

continually tossing and turning, Vinda came to me and softly said, “Why don’t you both also bring in your bedding and blankets out from your rooms and sleep comfortably?” Seeing Vinda chatting with me, a curious bhaiya also slid close to us, and Anuvinda followed suit. Thus, this sudden meeting of ours was transformed into a veritable assembly. And amusingly, those two had brought their beddings, but we were shivering in the cold weather. Moreover, they were giving such an abominable suggestion for protecting ourselves from the cold! I loathed their sympathetic suggestion, which went against *Acharya*’s instructions. He was not sleeping very far from us. Though it was quite dark, on careful observation, one could clearly see *Acharya* sleeping outside his chamber. Thus, Vinda’s deed reflected a very bad mentality indeed. If this were Vrindavan, I would have set them right in a minute, but what was the point in getting unnecessarily involved in an imbroglio? So, I replied with great humility, “Because this would mean disobeying *Acharya*; if it were not so, we too could use some bedding!”

Hearing my answer, Anuvinda butted in at this point and said nonchalantly, “Oh come on, who is there to see whether we are following his instructions or not?”

I was quite enraged by his attitude, but I still managed to reply in a calm tone, “Whether anybody else is observing us or not, are we not able to see ourselves? And what is of importance is what we ourselves see, not what others see.”

Unfortunately, Vinda did not appreciate these simple words of mine. He retorted sarcastically, “Oh, I had completely forgotten! You two are cowherd boys! You must be accustomed to sleeping like this! If you had been from a royal family like ours, you would have understood the difference!”

I was calm, but bhaiya, who was already exasperated by the strict discipline and the simple meals of the *ashram*, lost his temper on hearing Vinda’s taunts and I had great difficulty in placating him. How did it matter if someone had called us cowherd boys? Besides, what was wrong with what he said? Indeed, we were cowherd boys after all. And I was not ashamed of being a cowherd. Yes, it was true that they were proud of being princes, but that was their concern. Why trouble ourselves over this? I was just explaining all this to bhaiya, when suddenly, I saw *Acharya* walking towards us. He had probably heard the altercation between us. The moment he reached our chamber, he asked me, “What is the matter? Are you finding it difficult to fall asleep?”...What could I say? I did not utter a word.

Seeing that I had fallen silent, he said, “This is the effect of change of place. If a person can learn to change his mentality along with the changing

circumstances, he will never have to face such difficulties. Anyway, this is just your first day at the *ashram* so it can be overlooked. Many students here are unable to change their mentality even after several years at the *ashram*.”

On hearing these comments, both Vinda and Anuvinda winced. Their uneasiness was plainly evident on their faces. Then, in unison, they quickly threw their bedding off into a corner. Perhaps, *Acharya* wanted to chide them some more, so he glared at them and said, “What is the matter; is the deerskin pricking you?”

Frightened, both nodded their heads in assent. *Acharya* then smiled and said, “Why are you removing your bedding? If you find it very difficult to sleep on the bare floor, then use it. This is an *ashram*, not a religious place where an attempt is made to change one by force or trouble people unnecessarily. Here, you are taught how to transform your mind. From the very day when you accept to sleep on the bare floor of your own accord, you will have no need for bedding. And the truth is that even the cold will not trouble you from that day!”

Saying this, *Acharya* left the chamber. But what a wonderful lesson he had taught us—the lesson of ‘acceptance’! I quickly imbibed it and from the very next moment, I accepted sleeping on the floor. In an instant, I did not feel cold anymore! I did not need bedding or blankets now. Within moments, I began to snore. This was truly amazing! The attitude of acceptance worked like magic. To call it an ordinary lesson was to undermine it. Actually, I had cultivated this attitude ever since childhood. I would quickly accept everything that came my way, but now, the magic of acceptance held me completely under its spell. I had now realised that if one can change one’s circumstances, one should do so by all means. However, if one cannot, then one should accept it and move on.

I slept on the ground on the second night in the *ashram* too. Thereafter, we gradually began to get accustomed to the routine at the *ashram*. Meanwhile, my friendship with Sudama kept on growing. One of the main reasons for this was, of course, our mutual love for music. Another important reason was, that like us, he too did not belong to a royal family. Owing to this, his ego did not clash with ours. Actually, he was the son of another *Acharya*, and besides, he was the favourite student of *Acharya*-mother. Thus, sometimes he would behave in a patronising manner with us. But fortunately, his condescending attitude was within tolerable limits, and did not bother us much. Meanwhile, after arriving at the *ashram*, our life had become quite disciplined. We had to attend to all our daily chores ourselves, whether it was washing our own clothes or making our own beds. Besides, we also had to go out and collect the things necessary for running the *ashram*. We also had to exercise regularly and go to sleep and wake up at the stipulated time. Now, you are well aware that we were not accustomed

to a disciplined lifestyle. I had, of course, accepted it as a part of life in the *ashram*. Bhaiya, however, had a problem in toeing the line, and was troubled by many aspects of discipline at the *ashram*. He especially hated waking up very early in the morning. Still, I continued trying to help him adapt to life at the *ashram*; sometimes by explaining things to him, or at other times, by enticing him. But the trouble was, bhaiya had not one, but a thousand problems. Moreover, fresh trouble would indeed come our way every day, in one form or the other. Take this particular instance for example. One day, the royal palace sent delicious foodstuff to the *ashram*. Naturally, bhaiya and I were thrilled. I was just happy, but bhaiya's face lit up like a lamp! Now, you well know that both of us were very fond of food. Moreover, after coming to Mathura, we had developed a fondness for good food, and enjoyed all kinds of sweets and savouries. Also, bhaiya and I would gorge food enough for four people all by ourselves; in contrast, the food at the *ashram* was very simple and the portions meagre. How could we be satisfied by this? That being the case, it was but natural that we gluttons were deliriously happy to see all the delicious foodstuff that had arrived at the *ashram*. Alas, as we all know, that in life, there is many a slip between the cup and the lip. Perhaps this was what made life interesting. Indeed, as if to drive home this point, *Acharya* permitted us to eat only the fruits and curd from all that delicious food sent by the palace! All our joy instantly evaporated on hearing this; *Acharya* gave his instructions and left, but bhaiya was devastated. He felt as if someone had snatched the food right from his mouth!

So, trouble had come knocking at our door once again. Now we only had to wait for it to assume a terrifying form. Well, we did not have to wait long for that either. We had just begun to dejectedly peck at the food, when Vinda and Anuvinda lost their control. Actually, they had begun to drool the moment they saw the food. So, showing scant regard for *Acharya*'s instructions, they pounced on the food and began to gorge on the goodies sent by the palace. This, of course, was like rubbing salt on our wounds! We were already troubled by the sight of such a delicious spread, and now, standing there watching these two brothers feast right before us, was too much to bear! This too was a new experience for us; a delicious spread lay before us, and we desperately wanted to eat it all, but still, we were not eating it! That day, we were introduced to a new character trait within us. Perhaps this was the result of voluntarily agreeing to follow *Acharya*'s instructions. It can be said that this was more because of *Acharya*'s influence over us, rather than any special ability of mine. What I mean to say is, if some other *Acharya* had given such instructions, I would have probably disobeyed him and devoured all that delicious food that lay before us.

For the moment, the scene at the *ashram* had become quite amusing. Sudama and I were quietly eating the fruits, vegetables and curds while bhaiya was angrily attacking them. On the other hand, sitting right across us, Vinda and Anuvinda were still gorging on all the delicious food. Anyway, having had our fill, Sudama and I got up, but bhaiya refused to get up from there. No, no, he was not eating, but was gazing hungrily at all the sumptuous food! He was actually glaring at it, almost as if he was devouring it all with his eyes! In fact, he had already gobbled up as much as he could with his eyes! What tormented us most was that Vinda and Anuvinda were still stuffing themselves with food. And by now, the other students had also assembled over here. Everyone was silent as they witnessed this scene. Though I had got up having had my fill, I was still enjoying watching those two eat. When Anuvinda saw us staring at the food, he asked us, “Don’t you all wish to eat this food?”

Now, what sort of a question was this? Everyone was watching this scene, then why question just us? Anyway, the matter was trivial, so in a bid to stall any further exchange on this issue, I replied, “Of course, we do. Why should I lie? The wish is still there to some extent. But I have a greater desire to follow *Acharya*’s orders.” Vinda, it seemed, was just waiting for an opportunity like this. He immediately repeated his previous sarcastic comment, “Both of you are cowherd boys after all, and that too from the forests of Vrindavan! If you had ever tasted good food, you would have known what you are missing!”

When bhaiya heard this, he was livid, and seeing him thus, I became nervous. What if bhaiya vented out all his anger over the food on Vinda? Believe me, I just barely managed to calm bhaiya down, and I had to beg and plead with him a hundred times before I could do just that! But still, glowering at Vinda, bhaiya did warn him, “Beware, I am not used to hearing sarcastic comments!”

To this, Vinda replied with calm arrogance, “Oh, but I excel at making sarcastic comments!”

Seeing that the matter was getting out of hand, I intervened once again in a bid to defuse the situation and said with great humility, “All right, my friend, you may continue to pass sarcastic comments. Over time, we shall learn to tolerate them. We are learning some lessons from *Acharya*, and we will learn some from you as well.”

Sudama, who stood in a corner, was greatly enjoying our squabbling. Perhaps, he was accustomed to following *Acharya*’s rules and had got used to the jibes of the snobbish princes in the *ashram*. After all, he was one of the older students of this *ashram*. Just then, for some unknown reason, Anuvinda jumped into the fray; perhaps he did not want to lag behind his brother in taunting us. He did not say anything directly to us, but addressing Vinda, he said very

sarcastically, “Hey, where did *Acharya* pick up these two wild pigeons from? They have certainly ruined the good name of this fine *ashram*!”

The moment bhaiya heard this, he stood up, ready to explode. I was afraid that he might beat up both these brothers. The situation was fast getting out of hand. The harder I tried to ease the situation, the more these two brothers tried to keep it volatile. And unfortunately, it appeared as if they were winning. Of course, I was not the kind to accept defeat so easily, but as you all know, it is much easier to keep tempers running high than to calm down. So, naturally, they were scoring on us.

Just when the situation was about to explode, *Acharya* appeared suddenly out of nowhere. I was immensely relieved when I saw him. Clearly, it was the loud chatter of our voices that had brought him here. He looked sternly at Vinda and Anuvinda and said, “The glory of the *ashram* is not based on who comes here for an education. The *ashram*’s glory and reputation is based on what the students who pass out from here go on to achieve in life. That aside, how can arrogant students like you ever understand these things? From today, you two brothers do not have to follow my orders. For, it is not my task to subdue your desires, but to refine them, because suppressing desires makes them rise again with twice the intensity. I do not need to explain all this to you. But yes, in return for absolving you both from following my orders, it is expected that you two brothers will no longer interfere in the other students’ matters at the *ashram*.” After a few moments of silence, he added in a sterner voice, “Otherwise, be prepared to face grave consequences!”

The manner in which *Acharya* spoke, made Vinda and Anuvinda’s faces go pale with fear. Even I was amazed by the authority he exuded. After saying thus, *Acharya* had left, but once again he had taught me an invaluable lesson before leaving. The essence of his teaching was clear: To renounce something physically was of little worth. The important thing was to renounce it from your mind. I imbibed this teaching within my heart forever. After this incident, I never felt the urge to eat forbidden foodstuff at the *ashram*. As far as the suppression of desires was concerned, I had always vehemently opposed all forms of it, right from the very beginning. I was always an advocate of complete independence. The most fortunate aspect of this entire incident was that *Acharya* had managed to appear in the nick of time to save the situation. Otherwise, a fight between bhaiya and Vinda and Anuvinda would have become inevitable. And had this happened, God only knows what bhaiya would have done to them! Well, they would have met their fate, but imagine what would have happened to us after that! Both were the princes of Ujjaini. The *ashram* was anyway burdened by obligations from that kingdom. So, if perchance we had been expelled from the

ashram, our death at the hands of Jarasandha would have been certain. Well, did you notice? The *ashram* had protected us from Jarasandha, but we were still not free of the terror created by him. And this was solely because I had a problem named bhaiya tagging along with me at all times, which did not let the looming shadow of Jarasandha move away from us.

Anyway, as soon as this matter was resolved, all of us went to our chambers to sleep. Interestingly, we had just had a fight with Vinda and Anuvinda, and now, we had to sleep in the same room with them! Well, I had to stay awake anyway, to ensure that bhaiya and those brothers did not pick a fight again. And in my heart of hearts, I was venting out this anger on Vinda-Anuvinda. You might remember how happy I used to be seeing the princes in Mathura. They looked as if they had just stepped foot on earth from among the stars. But now when I had got the opportunity of being close to them, all my admiration for them had evaporated. Thinking about the princes, my thoughts took an entirely new direction. I thought, ‘Tomorrow, these very people will become the kings of different lands in Aryavarta. What will the future of Aryavarta be then? How will the common people be able to live peacefully? Was it not essential to change the age-old tradition of crowning the prince as the new king? Should not the most deserving person in the kingdom be made king instead of the prince?’ Actually, there are numerous such things in life that one can think over, but there is nothing that one can do about them. This line of thought also fell in that category. And even as I went on deliberating over all these aspects, the darkness of the night had surrendered to the bright golden rays of the rising sun.

Anyway, let me return to speaking about our days at the *ashram*. A few days later, we began our training with weapons. Though we were trained to wield all kinds of weapons, *Acharya*’s training laid more emphasis on the use of the mace and the sword. Needless to mention, this was the first time that we were formally learning to wield weapons. Certainly, this was by itself an important experience. The training programme would take its own course, but one positive outcome of this was, that with the beginning of the weapons training, bhaiya had started enjoying his stay at the *ashram*. And thanks to that, I had been relieved of the arduous task of pacifying him every now and then. As for me, I was so impressed by everything about *Acharya*, that I was completely obsessed with him. Indeed, I neither missed Mathura nor did I think of Jarasandha. I even forgot Vrindavan and Rukmini! *Acharya* had replaced everything else, and held absolute sway over my mind. On the other hand, even *Acharya* was very pleased to have me at the *ashram*. Perhaps that is why he had planned to begin the evening classes. This would indeed prove to be a very

useful experiment. In the evening classes, *Acharya* was expected to answer every question that crossed our minds. On just hearing about this initiative, a thousand questions had begun rushing into my mind.

Well, it was the first day of this experiment, and I was waiting for the class to begin all morning, ever since the announcement was made. After dinner, we had all gathered around *Acharya* in the open square in the centre of the *ashram*. We had all occupied our respective places as well. Full of enthusiasm, I was sitting with bhaiya and Sudama in the first row itself. Sitting on the grass in Ujjaini's cool climate was a pleasure unto itself. Soon, *Acharya* too arrived there along with mother. We stood up and greeted them with a *pranaam* and took our seats again after they were seated on the podium built under the tree. My heart was thumping with joy and eagerness. If one could get answers to all the questions in one's mind, what better education could there be? But surprisingly, even after *Acharya* had repeatedly invited us to ask our questions, no one came forth with any questions. Well, I was eager and waiting for just such an opportunity. So, this session commenced with my question, which I began with a proper preamble, "*Acharya*, I am a new student here, so if there is any error in my question, please pardon me. What I would like to understand is, what connection does abstaining from eating tasty food or sleeping on the bare ground have with our future? What is the objective behind this exercise? Why should we renounce that which is coming to us of its own accord? If something does not harm us, why abstain from it?"

As soon as I had finished my question, *Acharya* motioned to me to take my seat. Then he said in an encouraging tone, "Dear student! Your question is very good. Actually, there are two objectives behind this exercise. First of all, if there is something before you and you are fond of it, but despite this, following my instructions, if you are able to abstain from it—not only physically but also mentally—it means that you respect me. And one can get an education only from a teacher whom one respects. If not, all your learning will be futile. Secondly, life, even if it is that of a king, is not always rosy. New problems and challenges keep cropping up every day. In this *ashram*, we teach you to be prepared for your future. Remember, that even a king has to leave all his comforts behind when he steps out for a battle. Moreover, if he is defeated, he may even be imprisoned. So, just consider this as a mental and physical preparation for such eventualities."

I instantly shot another question at him, "Oh, so you mean you have nothing against comforts and good food?"

Acharya grinned and said, "Of course not! After passing out from the *ashram*, everybody here will enjoy royal comforts anyway. Remember, a person

who does not have wealth and yet desires to enjoy luxuries is a fool. But a man who has wealth but still does not enjoy it is a bigger fool!”

This was a very wise thing that *Acharya* had said and my doubts were cleared. With these few lines of wisdom, the day’s session was concluded, but gradually, I began to enjoy these evening question-answer sessions so much, that I would look forward to them from early morning itself. Well, this was the case as far as I was concerned, but I wondered, why bhaiya still did not feel comfortable at the *ashram*. Adherence to discipline, or getting an education was something that he could never cope with anyway. In fact, with the passage of time, he became so restless that in order to distract himself, he would stealthily slip away from the watchful gaze of *Acharya* and go out of the *ashram* for a stroll. Honestly speaking, I was getting very nervous about bhaiya entering and exiting the *ashram* in this manner. I even tried to dissuade him a couple of times, but to no avail. I feared only one thing: ‘what if *Acharya* learnt about this and took disciplinary action by expelling bhaiya from the *ashram*?’ If that happened, I too could be considered expelled along with him. After all, I could never leave bhaiya alone, could I? And, if we were thrown out, the demon in the form of Jarasandha would begin stalking us from that very instant. It would not only put an end to our education, but also to our lives! But was bhaiya going to listen or comprehend these facts? Thus, on one hand, while I was at peace and full of happiness at the *ashram*, on the other, I had to also handle this mental torment.

Well, bhaiya was not one to listen. By now, his escapades out of the *ashram* had become a daily routine. One day, during one of his clandestine outings, he inadvertently wandered off quite far from the *ashram*. Actually, the forest was just behind the *ashram*, but on that day, bhaiya had wandered deep into the denser parts of the forest. He kept wandering till afternoon, when suddenly a huge tiger sprang up in front of him. Of course, bhaiya was hardly the type to be frightened by a mere tiger. Staying at the *ashram*, he had anyway been deprived of any action for far too many days. So, there was no question of letting this golden opportunity slip by! It was a dense forest, there was silence all around, and the tiger was at a distance of around fifty yards. Instead of fleeing or moving away from the tiger’s path, bhaiya moved forward towards the tiger with measured steps. Now, there was no question of the tiger changing its direction either. Both kept advancing towards each other and finally clashed. Vrindavan did not have such huge tigers, and perhaps this was why bhaiya underestimated the tiger and kept his plough aside before leaping into the fight. But the tiger was quite big and strong. It appeared to be about twice bhaiya’s size and was very agile as well. He was locked in a duel with the animal for a long time, but when he saw that the tiger was not going to give up, he lost his patience. And

thereafter, where was the question of the tiger escaping his mighty plough? He moved back a few steps and swinging his plough, rammed it into the hapless tiger. Before the tiger had an opportunity to defend itself or even comprehend what had happened, the plough had found its mark. Now finishing off the wounded tiger was like killing a goat for bhaiya. And the tiger soon breathed its last. Well, the truth was, that bhaiya had already shown his bravery by killing the tiger with his weapon, instead of engaging it in a bloody battle. Now, he thought, 'Why not show off my bravery to the entire *ashram*?' There were two reasons behind this thought. Firstly, bhaiya wanted to flaunt his bravery and secondly, he felt disconcerted at times, with *Acharya* constantly praising me; so, he wanted to do something that would show him in good light. I am not just saying this without any reason. Once, during one of our conversations, he had even expressed this pain to me. In a moment of solitude, he had asked me in a very helpless tone, "Kanhaiya, how much longer do we have to stay at the *ashram*?"

I had enquired, "Why?"

And he had replied, "I don't feel good in this place."

I had said, "But *Acharya* is teaching us such valuable lessons. These lessons can transform our lives. Then, why don't you feel good?"

He had replied, "But you are able to promptly grasp whatever he teaches, while I cannot even remember his teachings."

I had then said to him in an encouraging tone, "But this is very easy. When he is teaching, you should listen so attentively that you forget your very existence. Then even you will be able to absorb it."

Responding to this, bhaiya said, "That is true I suppose, but *Acharya* keeps scolding me all the time! He has repeatedly told me, 'You cannot remember anything, but your brother only needs to hear something once, and he remembers it word for word.'"

I instantly realised what the problem was! It was not about his inability to memorise, or about *Acharya*'s chiding. The real problem was *Acharya*'s constant comparison between him and me which had naturally hurt his pride. However, it was not the only thing that wounded his pride. Staying among the princes was giving him an inferiority complex for no reason. Actually, the fact that he was from an ordinary family was gnawing at him from within. In contrast, I considered myself better than a thousand princes! Such silly problems never bothered me; you very well know that I was besotted with myself right from childhood! Well, bhaiya did not want to miss this golden opportunity of showing off. But for that, he had to drag the dead tiger all the way to the *ashram*. Now, pride is also a form of the all-powerful consciousness, which can make man perform even the most difficult tasks with comparative ease. Thus, in spite of

great difficulty, bhaiya somehow managed to drag the tiger, which was twice his size, all the way up to the *ashram*'s gate.

Leaving the tiger's carcass lying at the *ashram* gates, he came inside in search of me. At that time, I was sitting in the open square along with everyone else. Seeing bhaiya panting, I was shocked for a moment. Without uttering a word, he dragged me towards the main entrance. Everyone else became curious and followed us. Seeing the dead tiger near the entrance, I was stunned as was everyone else. But as soon as bhaiya punched the dead tiger, I knew what had happened. I had never seen such a huge tiger in Vrindavan; that dead tiger had made bhaiya sweat profusely even in this cold weather. Seeing what bhaiya had done, I recalled our childhood days, when he had once killed a huge crane and had then kept bragging about it for days. His habit of blowing his own trumpet was an old one. And this time around, it was after all a tiger! The *ashram* was full of princes, which meant that this was the perfect opportunity for bhaiya to flaunt his prowess in front of a distinguished audience. Now all I had to do was wait for bhaiya to boastfully say a few words! However, it was only I who was waiting; the others were still clueless about what was happening. For, the princes could not even imagine that anyone could kill such a huge tiger. However, it would become clear as soon as bhaiya began his bragging. I was very happy that now at least everyone would talk about his bravery. This meant that now there was no need for me to worry about bhaiya leaving the *ashram*. In the meanwhile, hearing all the commotion, *Acharya* too rushed to the main entrance and froze when he saw the dead tiger at the *ashram*'s gates. Then he carefully looked at bhaiya, standing with one leg placed on the tiger's back. He then glanced at all of us who were watching this spectacle. Bhaiya's pride soared the moment *Acharya* arrived, while I immediately went and stood close to bhaiya. True to his nature, as soon as bhaiya saw that everyone was present and the stage was set, he began bragging, "I was just taking a stroll in the forest when this tiger had the temerity to cross my path. Naturally, I was incensed and put it to eternal rest in just a couple of blows."

Hearing this, everyone began to praise bhaiya's bravery. Full of pride, bhaiya puffed up his chest even more and looking at *Acharya*, said, "I dragged it here only as a gift for you."

Acharya had been absolutely quiet until now. And there was no expression on his face either. I found this very surprising; I could not fathom exactly what was going on in his mind. Then I reasoned, 'It is not possible to discern what is going on in his mind, which is precisely why he is an *Acharya*!' On the other hand, it was quite obvious why bhaiya had killed the tiger and dragged it to the *ashram*, and this is precisely what makes bhaiya who he is!

Anyway, it did not matter if I could not fathom what was going on in *Acharya's* mind. Why not think about this from a perspective that was well within my capacity to understand? As soon as this thought crossed my mind, I chuckled at the sarcastic comment *Acharya* had made, because of which this innocent tiger had to lose its life! This thought faded away soon, but it rattled my entire thought process. Can other people's words and behaviour influence a person to such an extent? Is it possible for a person to be turned into a puppet? The connection between *Acharya's* sarcasm and *bhaiya's* killing the tiger was obvious. And if what I was thinking was indeed possible, then this was the best game ever. In this way, one could very easily use people like toys. Well, then it was settled, I liked this game so much that from then onwards, through my entire life, I used people like toys. However, it is also true that I never used them for any selfish gain. Incidentally, learning this game of influencing people had an added benefit for me. From then onwards, nobody could upset me in any manner, nor could anyone influence me. After all, it is playing with toys which makes one feel good; who enjoys becoming a toy? It was amazing; I had understood such a profound truth, but I had still not been able to fathom exactly what was on *Acharya's* mind! I gave up; perhaps, this was why he was the guru and I, the disciple.

I found it remarkable that in spite of having thought all this out at length, I had reverted to my usual state of mind, but *Acharya* refused to break his silence. I looked at *bhaiya*, who was still standing with his foot on the dead tiger, and then glanced at the expression of *Acharya*, who was standing in front of the other students. Even though I tried hard, I was still not able to muster the courage to break the silence. Then suddenly, *Acharya's* expression changed; wearing an annoyed expression, he moved a few steps closer to us. Then, he suddenly unleashed his anger on *bhaiya*. In a harsh, reprimanding tone, he said, "You have simultaneously committed two transgressions! Firstly, you have stepped out of the *ashram* without my permission, and secondly, by killing this tiger, you have unnecessarily killed a living being. You have been able to simultaneously commit these two transgressions, as until now, you have only seen your guru's kindness and not his ire!"

Bhaiya was badly shaken on hearing *Acharya's* words. This was the first time that I had seen him so frightened. Why just *bhaiya*, even I was quaking with fear. How stern and harsh *Acharya's* voice was! His demeanour was so imposing! Thankfully, the situation did not worsen. But yes, before leaving, *Acharya* did warn *bhaiya*, "It was your first offense, so I am condoning it. But remember, bringing or eating flesh in this *ashram* is strictly forbidden." Saying this, *Acharya* left, and all of us followed him. Naturally, *bhaiya* had become

quite despondent. The whole episode was indeed unfortunate. *Acharya* had reprimanded him in front of everybody and that too when bhaiya was expecting accolades from him. Consequently, our get-together that evening was an unusually quiet one. Bhaiya was dejected at the reprimand and hung his head down, refusing to look anyone in the eye. Everyone else was scared too, thinking that if they inadvertently did something wrong, they might have to face *Acharya*'s wrath. My plight was the worst; while my heart went out to bhaiya who was in this embarrassing situation, many thoughts regarding this episode were crowding into my mind. Naturally, it was the first time that I had heard the concept of violence against living beings, and a number of questions related to that were flooding my mind. But I could not muster the courage to open my mouth that evening. I had killed a number of wild animals myself; so, had I done something wrong? Now, only *Acharya* could answer this, but I would have to ask him first! However, I still did not have enough courage to do that, and when I was so scared, there was absolutely no question of anyone else daring to ask *Acharya* any questions. At any rate, nobody else took interest in asking questions. Just then, on seeing the gathering so quiet, *Acharya* finally enquired of me, "What happened Kanhaiya? Even you don't want to ask me any questions today?"

On hearing this, my courage soared high; did I need to wait for another opportune moment? I immediately shot off a question, "Respected *Acharya*, if a wild animal attacks us, should we not kill it even in self-defense?"

Acharya explained, "To defend yourself, you can do anything. But remember, even the animal has this right. So, just like you have the right to kill an animal to defend yourself, it also has the right to kill you to defend itself. But the truth is that an animal will not attack you until it feels threatened by you. Of course, if it has gone mad or is of a violent nature, then it is a different matter. For instance, quite often I have tigers and lions sleeping beside me. But till today, even their nails have never touched me, not even by accident."

I had clearly understood this; so, whatever I had done so far was right. In fact, I had killed wild animals not just to defend myself but also to protect everyone else. My first question was answered, but *Acharya*'s explanation raised one more question. Now that I was full of courage, what was the point in suppressing my curiosity? So, I asked the next question, "Then why is this quality not present in humans? They make enemies for no reason."

Hearing my question, *Acharya* smiled and said, "This is because man, instead of developing his inner self and becoming spiritual, has focussed more on evolving his intellect, and he has become accustomed to spending his life depending on his brain. He began to search for causes and reasons behind every

phenomenon. And that is why he got involved in trying to measure the infinite with his limited capability. Consequently, he has got disconnected from Nature's supreme energy and has become aberrant. And this is precisely why he has become so despondent and unsuccessful today. Actually, in the present times, man has made phenomenal intellectual progress, but at the psychological level, he has actually become worse than animals in many respects. This is proven by the fact that animals can sense the approaching seasons and impending dangers in advance, whereas man remains clueless about the danger hovering over him even when he is dying from a calamity. The unfortunate outcome of this is that he indulges in violence not just to satisfy his selfish interest, but even when his ego is hurt due to some reason."

Well, when *Acharya* was explaining things with such compassion, my curiosity was bound to be aroused further. Indeed, a unique query came to my mind.

I thought, if the person who is providing answers was not getting tired, why should the one asking questions, lag behind? Thus, I asked, "So, don't religious scriptures and code of ethics help man in this regard?"

Hearing this, *Acharya* laughed and said, "All the books on religion are filled with theoretical complexities and nothing else. At best, religious texts can only guide ignorant people to some extent. Actually, a man's soul and consciousness are his best guides. Meaning, unless one awakens these, there is no deliverance."

I became even more curious on hearing this answer. I was not prepared to back down now. After all, if the well does not shy away from quenching one's thirst, why should the thirsty one hesitate in asking for water? I immediately stood up and shot off another question. "*Acharya*, why is it that a man continues to indulge in misdeeds when the soul is present in his body? Why does he remain sorrowful? Does the soul not help man in addressing such matters?"

Acharya said, "Since man has given more prominence to his mind, intelligence and ego, the soul is unable to help even though it is present in the body, as it is always in a dormant state; and as it is clouded by greed and arrogance, very few, perhaps, one in a hundred thousand men, gain enlightenment."

I then asked, "How does one know if one's consciousness is in an awakened state?" Naturally, I wanted to get an idea of my own state of consciousness.

Acharya laughed again and said, "Having no interest in religious texts, moral codes or ethics, and tradition, is a sure sign of it."

Now, this was good news! I had never ever studied any religious texts!

So, there was no question of being interested or not interested in them. I never believed in moral code or ethics, to begin with. And as for traditions, I was a rebel who habitually disregarded them. I then became convinced that my consciousness was indeed in an awakened state. And that was certainly a powerful reassurance for my future. Now, my curiosity on this subject was growing further. So, I could not stop myself from asking another question, “How can a man attain or awaken his soul?”

Acharya smiled and replied, “When a man’s nature is to carry out every task with concentration and he performs his duties, big and small, with diligence, and if he gradually increases his concentration, then one day, he finds that his concentration has increased to such a level that he has forgotten his body, mind, intelligence, ego and indeed, his very existence. Then, at that very instant, his soul is awakened. However, this moment of enlightenment is rarely attained. Only one in a million attains this state of being. Then that moment of enlightenment is important not just for that person, or humankind at large, but it is precious for the entire universe. For, the moment he forgets his temporal existence, he becomes one with the essence of Nature.”

You will not believe, but today I was enjoying myself so much that my increasing curiosity compelled me to ask one final question, “So isn’t the *gurukul* helpful in helping one attain this state?”

Acharya replied, “Of course, the *ashram* will guide you in this matter. However, it depends on the guru’s love and the student’s grasping ability.” While saying this, *Acharya*’s face clouded over unexpectedly. Becoming a little angry, he continued, “But forget it. These days, both the guru and the *gurukuls* are getting corrupted. For instance, just see what’s happening in Hastinapur, where *Acharya* Drona runs a *gurukul* that teaches archery. Now, a tribal boy, without any help from Drona, managed to imbibe his teachings and became an excellent archer, just by devoutly installing Drona’s statue. This was indeed praiseworthy; but the fiendish Drona’s ego was hurt by it! He thought that if people were to learn archery just by making statues and without the guidance of a guru, then what would happen to *Acharyas*? This insane thought distressed him greatly. Now, that boy had learnt archery entirely due to his wondrous grasping ability and Drona had certainly not made any tangible contribution towards it. But how was that innocent boy to know this? He decided to follow the prevalent custom and offered to pay Drona his *gurudakshina*¹¹. And the depraved Drona exploited this opportunity to the hilt and demanded the boy’s right thumb as his fee! The poor tribal boy! Now, how will he hold and shoot his arrows?

And the most horrifying aspect of this episode is that Drona had taken

this terrible *gurudakshina* for a teaching which he had never imparted! If *Acharyas* stoop to the level of beasts, then what is the use of *gurus* and *gurukuls*?" Saying this, *Acharya* Sandipani became so unhappy that without speaking any further, he retired to his room. And after he left, we too returned to our chambers.

Truly, coming to this *ashram* and associating with a great personality like *Acharya* Sandipani was a blessing for me. My personality was blossoming exponentially. Now, even my ruminations had transcended the analysis of the mind and had started focussing on the mysteries of this world. In short, my inner mind was developing so rapidly, that my consciousness was soaring to greater heights every day. Meanwhile, everything was peaceful in the *ashram* too. The confrontations of the earlier days were now a thing of the past. Now, we were all great friends, and even Vinda and Anuvinda had become our friends. Sudama, Shwetketu and others were already our companions. As for me, from the very beginning, I liked to stay amongst friends. Thus, by coming to the *ashram*, my personality was maturing rapidly and at the same time, by acquiring an entirely new circle of friends, my mischievous nature had surfaced once again. Now we had ample fun in our room too. All sorts of pranks would be played in our rooms. Meanwhile, even bhaiya's cowherd-like nature had all but disappeared due to the friendship with the princes. And as for myself, I was so happy, that the *ashram* had become my entire life.

One day, all five of us were sleeping in our chamber. That night, I had also gone to sleep in time with everybody else, but I woke up around midnight. Now, once I was awake, there was no question of my going back to sleep immediately. So, my mind became lost in contemplating our mischievous antics at the *ashram*. We would always indulge in a lot of frolic before sleeping at night. Undoubtedly, coming to study under *Acharya* was proving to be the most progressive step in my life. With this thought, my contemplation took off in a different direction. Now, my arrival at the *ashram* was just a moment in time, but actually, if one were to deliberate over it, one would realise that it had taken several years to occur. On deeply pondering over it, one could see that there were several smaller incidents that had led to my arrival at *Acharya's ashram*. For instance, had Kansa not tried to kill me as soon as I was born, I would never have reached Vrindavan. And, if I had not encountered threats from the numerous wild animals and demons in Vrindavan, I would never have had the opportunity to become so strong and capable. And had Kansa not devised the plot to compel me to go to Mathura in order to kill me, I would not have reached Mathura. And had Kansa not unleashed his fury on the innocent gopas and father, on that fateful day at the festival, then I certainly would not have killed

him. Perhaps, I would have quietly returned to Vrindavan. But most importantly, had my aunts not become so enraged and agitated, I would not have had to fear Jarasandha. And had Jarasandha not been a cause for concern, then grandfather would have never sent me to *Acharya* Sandipani's *ashram*. Meaning, I would have never been able to reach his *ashram*. All in all, the gist of my deliberation was that major events that transpire in our lives are a consequence of a number of previous, smaller events. This meant that the current highs and lows in one's life are merely the harbingers of a major event in life in the future. This was all true, but on analysing all these events, the startling fact that emerged was that my enemies had a great hand in moulding my future! And when I reflected on the culmination of these related events, I found that all of them were leading me to the tutelage of *Acharya* Sandipani. This clearly implied that my enemies had a great hand to play in whatever good I had achieved in life! And if one's enemies were indirect benefactors, then who is really an enemy in this world? In such a case, whom should one consider to be an enemy? Perhaps, no one. For instance, all the great enemies in my life had, in the end, proven to be my greatest benefactors. Actually, they were the ones who had proven to be the guiding light in my life. The moment this thought struck me, I felt so grateful to these enemies of mine, that I began to thank not just the troubles which had come to me in Vrindavan, Kansa or my aunts, but I also thanked Jarasandha from the bottom of my heart. For, today I was where I was, entirely because of their intervention.

Well, I had arrived at this conclusion but it seemed as if my deliberations were not ready to stop here. After tossing and turning some more in my disturbed sleep, I came up with another thought, 'Is it that whatever transpires in one's life, actually occurs to inexorably lead him towards some goal?' Actually, I had a valid reason for thinking like this. It was the confluence of all the events that had occurred in my life so far, which had led me to *Acharya* Sandipani's *ashram*. With one successful analysis after another, my mind began to glide unfettered. Finding the opportunity, it took off on new flights of deliberation. Now, my contemplation had nothing to lose but it was my sleep which was being interrupted. So, let it be interrupted; what option did I have right now other than complying with it? So, finding the door open, my contemplation eagerly began attempting to ferret out the mysteries of Nature. But considering my present intelligence, this was not so easy. Still, I was confident that sooner or later, my brilliant analytical mind would unravel all the mysteries of the universe. Naturally, my confidence was based on my grasping ability and my determination to learn.

Speaking about learning, my thirst for it was such, that all through the trip from Mathura to Ujjaini, I had learnt how to pack and prepare for a long

journey. I had paid attention to every minute detail and tucked it away for future use. As a result, I had automatically learnt about the articles that needed to be taken along, the methods to keep a chariot well maintained, repair its wheels and much more. On the other hand, it had not taken me long to grasp that a night halt is the most important feature of a long journey. Indeed, during that single journey, I had realised that it was always best to halt in the vicinity of a settlement, preferably in a temple compound, in a rest house or an inn. Thinking about night halts, I recalled how, while crossing the desolate areas around the Chambal River, we could not find a suitable place for a night halt. I remember quite well that we had to spend that night on a rocky outcrop. Besides which, three or four of us had to stand guard in turns, all through the night, to protect ourselves from wild animals. This meant that for a long journey, other than alertness and bravery, it was also essential to be prepared for an all-night vigil. During a long journey, special care also had to be taken to ensure that the horses got sufficient water to drink from time to time. Feeding them on time and giving them sufficient rest in the afternoon, were seemingly small details that were actually quite crucial to the journey. In short, the reason behind saying all this here, is that I had learnt all of it entirely on my own; nobody had taught me, nor had anyone actually underlined the importance of learning all this to me. I had picked all this up on my own merely because I was fond of learning.

Anyway, I was one of a kind. Perhaps, this was why, thinking of long journeys, I suddenly felt a great urge to take on one; but not like the one I had embarked on earlier. I wanted a trip with only my friends in total freedom. For, you would remember, during our last journey, when *Acharya* was with us, we had to adhere to strict discipline. And this discipline had certainly taken the fun out of that long journey. While we wished to bathe in a beautiful lake, *Acharya* would instruct us to go and gather fruit. When we wanted to relax and lie down, *Acharya* would demand that we exercise. Naturally, all these strictures gave birth to the idea of embarking on a long journey without the inhibiting effects of a disciplinarian. Truly, how wonderful it would be, if one were to get the opportunity to go on a long journey in the boisterous company of friends! Every stream, mountain, settlement, village, town, the myriad birds, animals and various kinds of plants along the way, would be a source of infinite pleasure! All along the way we would stop, eat, drink and enjoy to our heart's content. We would quarrel and argue, romp and play, swim and bathe in the rivers and lakes, and enjoy such a thrilling and memorable journey!

Oh! My thoughts were certainly out of control today! I had begun with an attempt to understand the mysteries of the universe, but now, here I was, thinking of a long, sweet journey with close friends! As such, whether it is in

real life or during contemplation, the highs and lows have their own charm. Speaking of highs and lows, there was a sudden upheaval in our happy *ashram* life. Only a few days had passed since this vigil of mine, when suddenly, a few more sleepless nights got arranged for me of their own accord. What happened was, one day, Rukmi of all people, arrived at the *ashram*. He had come to meet Vinda and Anuvinda; perhaps he was their friend. Upon seeing him, my mind was overwhelmed with sweet memories of Rukmini, and naturally, I lost my mental peace. Probably, he had not recognised me, thanks to my *ashram* clothing; even so, I thought it prudent to stay out of his sight and thus remained in my room till the time he was at the *ashram*. He did not stay for long, and taking *Acharya*'s permission, he left in a hurry, along with Vinda and Anuvinda. Perhaps, there was some function at the royal palace. Well, he had left the *ashram*, but not before making me apprehensive once again of the death threat—Jarasandha. Seeing the friendship between Rukmi, Vinda and Anuvinda, I realised that the entire Aryavarta belt was full of kings who were friends of Jarasandha. This meant that it would be next to impossible to evade Jarasandha's attack for long. The only thing that would save me from Jarasandha's wrath was what had saved me until this day—my determination to stay alive. Without that, this story of my life would have ended long ago.

To cut a long story short, just one sight of Rukmi totally shook me to the core of my being. I, who had made the *ashram* my home and was enjoying myself, living completely in the present, found this sweetness in my life soured by my would-be brother-in-law, Rukmi's arrival. My mind once again began to vacillate between memories of the past and anxieties of the future. The first folly that Rukmi had committed was to refresh the memories of Rukmini in my mind. Secondly, he had reawakened the memory of the demon named Jarasandha. At the same time, Rukmi's friendship with the Ujjaini princes Vinda and Anuvinda had also proved that even Ujjaini was very much within the sphere of Jarasandha's influence. This meant that sooner or later, Jarasandha would learn of our presence at the *ashram*. And then, the moment we left the *ashram*, he would swoop down on us. Just see how the mere arrival of Rukmi had badly trapped my mind in such futile conjectures. Naturally, setting eyes on a worthless person brings useless thoughts to mind. I was living so peacefully in the *ashram*, and now, this future brother-in-law of mine had arrived and brought with him unpleasant memories of the demon Jarasandha and distressing memories of my love, Rukmini. Of course, at this point in time, both of them were but distant memories. Neither could Rukmini nor could the demon Jarasandha dare to venture into this *ashram*. Therefore, it was best that I freed myself from these worthless conjectures as soon as possible.

And somehow, I did manage to become free of them. But how could that help? Destiny was bent on keeping me in a constant state of anxiety; it ensured that my restlessness would persist, if not by the shadow of death then by the no less deadly sword of love. The next day, an incident occurred which was so strange, that for the first time since I had arrived here, I was forced to think of the world outside the *ashram*. That day, it was my turn to go outside the *ashram* and beg for alms. I do not know what came over me, but I soon found myself walking towards the royal palace. Now, as the *ashram* was outside the city, the road from the *ashram* was completely free from the hustle and bustle of the city. With rows of lush green trees on both sides of the road, this was certainly a very peaceful and pleasant way to go walking. There was no wayfarer or stray animal to be found as far as the eye could see. So, I was majestically walking towards the city on this lonely road. But I still have not told you one thing. Perhaps because it was not that important at that time, but in the context of what I am about to tell you, it assumes importance. Actually, on the third day after we had arrived at the *ashram*, our lustrous curly hair had suffered a casualty. Yes, our heads had been shaved leaving just a tuft of hair at the back. Not just this, like everyone else, we too had to wear the simple clothes given by the *ashram*. This was not only a part of the discipline of the *ashram* but it was also the identity of *Acharya* Sandipani's students in Ujjaini. In the beginning, bhaiya and I would laugh looking at our new pig-tailed look. But now we had grown accustomed to it. And besides, how long does it take for hair to grow? Oh! I was going to tell you about something else, and look where this discussion has strayed instead! Well, coming back to the point, I was still walking on the lonely road, clad in my *ashram* garb, to beg for alms. I had been walking for only a little while when suddenly, I heard the sound of a chariot approaching. I turned my head and saw it hurtling down the path and kept staring as it flashed past me, as if tearing into my very being. Although I was lost in my own thoughts, my sharp eyes had not missed seeing anything about the chariot. And when I looked into it, I was stunned. Rukmini was seated inside! She appeared so poised, dignified and so beautiful! Even her attire was as attractive as she was. The queen of my dreams drove past in her chariot and I just stood there dumbfounded! What can I say? The chariot was gone in a flash. But the image of Rukmini was etched in my mind and refused to leave. I stood there, frozen like a statue. But why had she not stopped? With this thought, I felt a little dejected. Then another thought struck me. Perhaps she had not recognised me. How could she? There was no hair on my head. And when there was no hair, there was no question of my identity, the peacock feather, to be there either. Moreover, I was wearing the garb of a celibate. Perhaps, all these factors had made it difficult for her to recognise

me. With this thought, I felt disgusted with my attire. Had I been in my original form, then she would have certainly recognised me, and she would have certainly stopped the chariot too. But these thoughts were nothing more than wishful thinking. For, my attraction towards Rukmini was a personal matter—in my mind alone. Neither bhaiya nor Uddhava, nor for that matter, Rukmini herself, knew anything about it. How can I even put into words the attraction that I, a poor simple cowherd boy, felt for a princess? Wouldn't I be ridiculed and called a madman?

I was caught up in thinking about Rukmini, when suddenly the chariot stopped at a distance. It did not just stop, but it turned and was coming back towards me! I jumped in sheer joy! Great! Perhaps, my Rukmini had recognised me in spite of my celibate's attire. If that was the case, then she was certainly attracted to me. The mere thought made this cowherd get goosebumps. The scene was such that I was dumbstruck, and looked with hopeful eyes at the returning chariot. I had a thousand dreams in that single moment. As the chariot had come to a halt where I was standing, it had indeed returned because of me. Realising this, I nearly lost control of myself and my thrill reached its peak. As soon as the chariot stopped near me, Rukmini daintily got down from it. I could only stand and stare at her alighting in such style. Getting down from the chariot, Rukmini moved straight towards me. With every step she took towards me, my heart was racing faster. I was completely floored by this poise of hers. But what was she doing? She came and dropped some fruits in my begging bowl. She did not even look at me! This single act shattered my delusions; I was in a peculiar condition. For a second, I just kept looking at the fruits in the begging bowl. Along with the fruits, I could clearly see my aching heart in it. But I immediately shifted my glance from the bowl and looked at the smiling Rukmini. Surprisingly, my very life was standing before me, and I was standing there, as if lifeless. The person who could make my heart skip a beat by just entering my thoughts, now stood in front of me, but had failed to recognise me. If nothing else, this act of hers was a harsh reminder that she was a princess and I, just an ordinary cowherd! A voice in my head instantly spoke, 'Keep dreaming as much as you want, she is not willing to even acknowledge your existence.'

But this meant that I had lost. And what a terrible defeat it was! And this was not just a defeat for me; it was also a defeat for every cowherd boy who wanted to soar to the heavens on the wings of love. But, as you well know, defeat was unacceptable to me and now it was a question of all the poor lovers. Still, what could I do? This was not a battle that could be won by force or deceit. So, what? Love had its own methods; I could try them out. I had to try and win; I could not let my dreams be shattered in this manner. Thus, I immediately

regained my composure, strengthened my mind, and consoled my heart by thinking that she might be angry with me for some reason. 'Why do you worry? Is anger not the first step towards love?' So, I glanced at her, with hopeful eyes, and flashed my most famous, disarming smile. But just look at the attitude of this princess! Neither did she pay any heed to it, nor did she say anything in reply. This was too much! She could have at least had some respect for the feelings of a poor lover. She could have at least given me some sort of a response, even if it was not a genuine one. But no, her face was averted from me. Here I was standing before her, but her eyes were fixed on her chariot. I felt as if my very life had left my body. The alms had been given and that was the end of the matter. 'Hey! I do not want your fruits. I want your heart!' This princess, intoxicated by the power of her wealth, had made this poor lover look like a fool. I was thinking about all this, and meanwhile, she had turned around and had begun to walk back towards her chariot. I stood there, gazing fixedly at her; my life seemed to have deserted me. Then suddenly, she turned around and I once again became hopeful on seeing her turn. I thought she would immediately say, 'I was just pulling your leg, how did you like it?' But unfortunately, nothing of that sort happened. Oh! The vanity of these princesses! She had not paid the slightest attention to my disarming smile but had pointedly ignored it instead; thus, in her own way, putting me in my place—that of a poor cowherd boy. She folded both her hands and with great humility, said, "Forgive me, our chariot was moving very fast and therefore, we could not stop sooner. We know it is not right to pass by a celibate desiring alms without offering him something."

Hearing this, I came back to consciousness. And along with it, returned all the hopes which I had pinned on her. Obviously, she had not recognised me! I was annoyed at myself. I had unnecessarily heaped all kinds of allegations upon her. Perhaps this is what happens in love. The fault may be yours, but it is the other person who is invariably blamed for it. Just then I began to speak with Rukmini in my mind, 'Agreed that you couldn't recognise me by my attire; but what about my smile? Have you forgotten that as well?' Clearly, this was no longer a question of my expectation from her but that of my very existence! And I certainly did not like a question mark on my existence! I decided to flash my trademark smile more effectively, thinking that it might ring a bell. I also thought of using my wit. Maybe she would then remember that she had a poor lover! As such, my self-confidence and enthusiasm had returned on realising that she was not deliberately ignoring me, but it was just that she had not recognised me. So, I majestically moved two steps towards her and asked her with a smile, "Actually, everybody gives alms to a celibate and unsolicited advice to others. So, how can I express my gratitude to you?"

Perhaps, she liked the way I spoke, or perhaps she did not expect such wit from a celibate. Whatever the reason, she stopped and for the first time looked carefully at me and especially at my smile. That was not all. She then calmly proceeded to examine me from head to toe, as if in an effort to jog her memory. My hopes were now sky high. A thousand aspirations began to rise in my heart. And the good thing was that as she continued looking at me searchingly, her gaze fell on my flute. She literally jumped in surprise. However, there was more innocence than love behind it. Whatever it was, for me, just the fact that she had recognised me was enough; I instantly felt my life force and awareness return. The poor lover's fate had changed. I quickly became my natural self. As soon as she had recognised me, in a chirpy voice that rang with sweet familiarity, she said, "Oh, it is you! Krishna! Your look has changed completely!"

This time, I smiled as well, and replied jauntily, "Not just my attire, my life too has changed completely!"

She said, "But your nature has not changed. It is the nature of a person that connects his past to his future."

I said, "Actually, my flute has not changed either. It helps me recollect my golden memories." Then taking a deep breath, I said, "It also helps my friends recognise me."

Hearing this, she smiled, and walked backwards to her chariot. What was this? I mentally pleaded with her, 'Let us talk for a bit longer – it is so much fun.' Then another thought flashed in my mind, 'But if she obeyed you, how would she be called a princess?' Even her charioteer was constantly staring at us. Perhaps, he was also trying to understand how the Princess of Kundinpur knew a mendicant from Ujjaini. I thought, 'Do not even try to understand, my dear fellow. This is the magical play of Krishna!' Let us forget it, for now, let me talk about the magical show that Rukmini was putting up. She got into her chariot and I was left standing on the road. I was feeling dejected on seeing her go, when she called me towards her. I ran and reached her chariot with alacrity, as if she had invited me to go along with her to Kundinpur. What do I say about Rukmini's attitude! I had just started to smile at her, resting my back on her chariot, when she spoke very gravely, "It is surprising. What has this hero who killed Kansa, and the saint who refused a kingdom, come to learn at the *ashram*? Courage and renunciation are the only two things worth learning in human life. And you have already convincingly demonstrated that you have learnt them very well."

Just as she said this, her chariot drove off. And with this, our beautiful meeting came to an end as far as she was concerned, but for me, the meeting still

continued. Yes, I was still standing right there in the middle of the road, looking at the speeding chariot and the dust cloud rising from it. Finally, when the chariot disappeared from my sight and the dust settled, I came back to my senses to some extent. And as soon as I came back to my senses, I was lost in thinking about her words. Truly, this time too, whatever she had said was so profound. She had once again reminded me how deep and profound her thinking process was. Truly, in the form of my beloved, I had got a teacher who would invariably teach me a valuable lesson whenever I met her.

Well, she had gone, but not without permeating my entire being with her vivacious presence. Indeed, she had entered every cell of my body. Not just my heart and mind, but even my bones, flesh, marrow and blood were all calling out her name. Once again, Rukmini had succeeded in flooring me with her eyes and words; once again, as always, I had been left staring after her. Indeed, I had become so intoxicated by her that I found it difficult to regain my senses. Well, did I want to return to my senses? What was the use of living if there was nothing that could intoxicate you in this manner? Oh! What a lovely moment it was! Could she not have stayed a while longer? But how could she have stayed? Why would she have stayed? It was I who was hurt, not she. That was why she had laughed and left. It was anyway futile to expect mercy from heartbreakers. And when she herself had laughed and left, then what was the need for me to stand here like a statue cloaked in gloom? When the one who had made me lovesick was not ready to treat me, it was best that I treat myself. Rukmini was gone, but the fruits that she had given me as alms were innocuously lying in my bowl. Oddly, I felt great affection towards these fruits. They had been given to me as alms, so they rightly belonged to the whole *ashram*. Still, I could not share them with the people at the *ashram*. How could I? They were fruits given to Krishna for being Krishna. Only Krishna had a right to them. Thus, regardless of propriety, I ate all the fruits very lovingly, right then and there. To a lover like me, could anything taste sweeter and more ambrosial than those fruits?

Then I thought, 'Now, what next? Will you keep standing here until evening?' 'Well, no, but now Krishna will not be able to go ahead to beg for alms either.' So, quietly and slowly, I started walking back towards the *ashram*. As I neared the *ashram*, thoughts of Rukmini automatically receded away from my mind. And as soon as I set my eyes on *Acharya*, all intoxicating thoughts of Rukmini vanished. I was back to being a dutiful student who had taken refuge at the feet of *Acharya*. Truly, this was a unique gift I had. When Rukmini was before me, my whole being was completely absorbed in her. At that time, if I had been cut into a million small pieces, each one of them would have called out her name! But now that I was at the *ashram*, my entire being was devoted to

Acharya. Rukmini had vanished and you would not have found her anywhere in me, even if you had searched for her. In simple words, Rukmini was the truth at that moment, and *Acharya* was the truth at this moment. This was my habit of living in entirety, due to which whatever my mind focussed on, it did so completely, and whatever I let go of, was totally discarded from my entire being. This was one of my most prized qualities and to have cultivated this quality was in itself an admirable achievement. But unfortunately, I had also gained a bad reputation because of this very trait. This ability to live completely in the present moment was really something to be greatly respected, but due to people's misunderstanding, it managed to earn me names like trickster, fraud, liar, illusionist and cheat. When I had Radha in my life, there was no one else, and when I was with Malini, then I was wholly with her. Similarly, just a few moments earlier I had been with Rukmini, but right now, I was with *Acharya*; in fact, wherever I was, I was there in my entirety. I wonder why this completeness of mine had become a problem for everyone. Actually, it was not that difficult to understand the reason behind it. For, whenever I stayed with somebody, I did so completely, with full honesty. And it is certainly difficult for anyone to forget the moments which one has spent with someone in entirety. In this world filled with deceit and lies, who stays with anyone completely? And if someone stays completely with you even for a second, then can there be any moment more beautiful than that moment for that person? This was the reason why everybody wanted to possess me fully for themselves. But my life was like a flowing stream. How could anyone hold me? And if one could be caught, then how could one be complete? So, in this game of chase, everyone was getting separated from me, one after the other. And naturally, whoever parted ways from me would rain curses on me. That person would not admit that he or she cannot live without me or that the person is tormented by their memories of me. On the contrary, they would find faults with me and begin cursing me!

Let us forget all this, as this is a routine matter and an old story. Here, at the *ashram*, we were passing our days merrily. Be it *Acharya*'s lessons, the art of combat, the company of friends or the discipline at the *ashram*, I enjoyed everything related to it. Then suddenly one day, something happened which, though completely unexpected, turned out to be the greatest event of my life. One day after lunch, all of us students were sitting under a tree behind the *ashram* and chatting, when suddenly, *Acharya*-mother sent for Sudama. Reacting spontaneously, I too followed him. Actually, we had run out of firewood. So, as soon as we reached, Mother called out, "There is no firewood today."

Before I could think, Sudama immediately searched out an axe and some ropes, and prepared to go to the forest to collect firewood.

Seeing this, the worried Mother called out, “Please take someone with you!”

Sudama answered, “Krishna... he is already here with me.”

When I heard this, I too picked up an axe and some rope and was ready. We were about to leave, when mother came out and beckoned to Sudama. She then quietly took him inside. When he came from the house, I saw from a distance that he had a small bundle in his hand, and he was trying to tuck it into his waistband. I couldn’t understand what the matter was, so as soon as Sudama came within hearing distance, I asked him, “What did you bring from *Acharya*-mother, my friend?”

He said, “Oh nothing, she had just called me to instruct me to be careful in the forest.”

“Be careful of what?” I asked in surprise.

He said, “She just said we shouldn’t harass wild animals.”

I realised that Sudama was lying. I could clearly see that he was hiding something from me. On seeing his reluctance to tell me, I thought it best to forget it and did not pursue the matter further. And then, we both set off quietly. We both looked very peculiar, with ropes hanging around our necks and axes in our hands. We had taken the path that led to the forest. It wasn’t very far and we soon entered the forest. We walked for a while, but we still did not come across any dead trees from which we could cut firewood. It was the monsoon season and the forest appeared as if it was satiated after having soaked up all the rainwater, and was now dancing away joyfully flaunting its lush greenery. The weather was undoubtedly very pleasant, but our problem was that it was not that easy to find dry firewood in the monsoon. We had been walking for quite a while now, and had still not found a single dead tree. Somewhat frustrated, Sudama said, “Green trees too can be cut and the wood can be dried, then why has Mother instructed us to bring wood only from a dead tree?” I did not reply. After a while, he himself said, “Perhaps deadwood is easier to burn.” I still remained silent. Actually, I was so lost in the lovely weather, that I did not feel like talking about anything else. We kept walking in this manner, crossing one mountain, then another, but we still could not find any dead trees. Soon, it was dark and we were both exhausted to the bone. But we both knew that according to the discipline of the *ashram*, if we had been sent out to get dry firewood, then that was all we could bring. And there was no question of going back without the firewood. However, as it was dusk, we clearly could not search anymore that day. We had to wait till the next morning. I did not mind waiting, but Sudama was very irritated by this.

Well, let him be! Finally, worn out, we took shelter near a waterfall.

Flowing from behind a large rock, this waterfall was indeed very enchanting. The speciality of this waterfall, which was situated at a considerable height, was that it was surrounded by three huge trees. And just behind this waterfall, one could see mountains spreading far and wide. And right in front of it lay the forest, in all its natural glory. Honestly speaking, I was floored by the waterfall's beauty the very moment I first set eyes on it. Sudama, who was exhausted, sat down immediately, but I, a passionate lover of Nature's beauty, craned my neck to feast my eyes on the entire scenic beauty around the waterfall. When I was a little satisfied, I drank some of its cool, clean, crystalline water and quenched my thirst. But what do we do next? The atmosphere was not conducive to chatting, due to the roar of the waterfall, and we were quite fatigued as well, so we quietly lay down on the rocks near the waterfall. It was amazing! Sudama fell asleep as soon as he lay down, but I could not. That was probably because I was hungry; I had not eaten anything since the afternoon and this was my first experience of being totally famished. I guess Sudama was habituated to it. No doubt, even I was tossing and turning and trying to get some sleep, but it was all in vain.

Then suddenly, flashes of lightning tore through the inky sky. Sudama too woke up with a start. Even as we watched, a strong wind began to lash the forest, and with it came torrential rain. The rain soon began to pour down in sheets. I looked all around, but there was no cave where we could take shelter. It was then that I caught sight of a huge rock. There was enough room underneath it for two or three people to stand. I prodded Sudama and asked him to run towards it. At least, we would not get drenched in the rain if we sat underneath it. Within a second, both of us hungry boys were standing beneath the rock. We were saved from getting soaked but it was thunderous rain pouring all around. The sound of thunder reverberated in the skies. It was so dark now, that one could not even see one's hands. It was only the intermittent flashes of lightning that helped us get a fleeting glimpse of our surroundings. Gradually, the rain got heavier and soon manifested itself as a full-fledged storm. It seemed as if the sky would burst, as strong winds lashed through the mountainside. Lightning flashed; small waterfalls erupted all around the hills, their soft trickle turning into a roar.

By now, Sudama was a quivering picture of fright. He asked with a whimper, "What will happen now, Kanhaiya? Oh God! When will this rain stop?" I smiled with amusement and said cheerily, "Do not worry unnecessarily, Sudama. The stormier the night, the sunnier the morning will be!"

I was not preaching useless philosophy. This was the experience of my life. Earlier, my life was eclipsed by darkness in the form of Jarasandha and now, sunny morning had dawned in the form of *Acharya*. Thus, with full confidence, I

continued to reassure him and said, "If the rain expends all its fury tonight, then it will not have any energy left to continue the next day. Therefore, there is no need to worry unnecessarily."

"But what will happen tonight?" asked the trembling Sudama.

"Ah yes, this night too shall pass, just like other nights have passed in our life," I continued. "You are getting frightened for no reason. Tell me one thing my friend, what is the difference between fear and death?" But all my assurances were rendered futile in front of his fear. In the flash of lightning, I could see that he had actually become pale with anxiety and fear. I made one more effort to change his mood by saying, "What will you gain by sitting quietly this way?"

"What do you want me to do then? Cry?" he asked irritably.

“No, sing,” I replied. “What breathtaking rain it is! How great it will be if you sing and I play the flute!”

“You really are a strange fellow,” retorted Sudama. “You want me to sit in the lap of death and sing? Have you gone insane?”

I said, “If we had been at the *ashram* now, and a storm had been raging outside, then what would we have been doing? You would certainly have been singing, and I would have been playing the flute. Come now, we have always been doing this when it rains, and this is the art of living.”

Indeed, it is sheer foolishness to ruin your future by worrying about the present, and ruin your present by worrying about the future. As it is, I strongly disliked fear, worry and sorrow. I was a seeker of joy and merriment. Why would I ruin such a valuable night of my small but precious life, in futile worry? But this was my thinking and understanding; Sudama was struck by such terror that it showed no signs of abating. But then I was not one to quit easily either. I tried once again to bring him back to normalcy, “Perhaps we are not at the *ashram*, we are in the forest; but it is raining and the weather is so lovely! Then why should we not sing and play? If circumstances can change a person’s nature, what kind of human being is he?”

However, having said that, I also did some introspection. Ever since I became associated with *Acharya*, I had begun to articulate enlightening truths with increasing frequency. Of course, sensing that my wisdom was not having the desired effect, I immediately reverted to discussing practical needs. Changing the subject of the conversation I said, “I am feeling very hungry. If you have something to eat, bring it out.”

He replied with some embarrassment, “What do I have? Where could I have got anything from?”

I was astonished, “Why? When you left did *Acharya*-mother not give you something to eat?”

“No, she did not!” Sudama lied blatantly.

But his lie could not remain hidden for long. Soon, I sensed that he was hiding something and eating. I could not restrain myself. I asked, “What are you eating, my friend?”

He replied, “Nothing...nothing at all!”

“Then how come I can hear your teeth chewing on something?” I asked again.

He said, “Maybe it is the cold. It is making my teeth chatter. Can you not feel the wind? It is so very strong.”

I understood. The more I questioned him, the more he would lie. For, to conceal one lie, it often becomes necessary to continue lying. And who knew

this better than me? I would have butter smeared on my face but would still keep trying to convince Mother Yashoda saying, “I did not eat the butter.” And then I would go on to answer every question she asked with increasingly innovative lies! This was exactly what Sudama was doing now. In a flash of lightning, I had clearly noticed him eating roasted gram from a small packet. But I decided to be patient. Indeed, I did not think it appropriate to expose his lies. I had spared Sudama, but to tell you the truth, I was surprised at *Acharya*-mother’s mindset. She was *Acharya*-mother, meaning the entire *ashram*’s Mother. She should have treated all students equally. If she had given gram to Sudama, she ought to have given some to me as well. Such behaviour certainly did not befit the wife of *Acharya* Sandipani. And besides, Sudama was my dear friend. He seemed to be so innocent. Having said that, I also knew from my experience that when the time is crucial, it is these very innocent people who begin to behave strangely. ‘Did you not see how scared Sudama was? After all, what else can you expect from such a frightened person? Noble deeds can be performed only by the fearless.’

Anyway, for some time, I vented out my anger in this manner. Then I thought, why should I spoil my night with such worthless thoughts? So, I decided that it was wise to remove all thoughts of *Acharya*-mother, Sudama and roasted gram from my mind. However, at this time, there was nothing much that I could focus on about myself either. On the outside, there was torrential rain and within me, the gnawing pangs of hunger. I was also feeling very cold because of that. Well, these were the circumstances that prevailed at present, and that was the end of it. I immediately consoled myself with the thought that when the problem did not have any solution, why dwell upon it so much? I would eat food when there is food. The rain would stop when it had to. Dawn will break at a fixed time. When none of these things were in my hands, why worry unnecessarily? Why not accept things as they were and enjoy this beautiful night instead? It was an obvious truth; when a solution is not available, withdrawing one’s mind from the problem is the best solution. Incredibly, here I was, the wise one, struggling with myself, while the terrified Sudama had eaten and peacefully nodded off to sleep! Now, the one who has eaten to his heart’s fill can definitely sleep peacefully. Well, the scene was quite captivating. Sudama was sleeping in the shelter of the rock, and I was sitting on my knees, near his head, rubbing my hands to ward off the cold. Just then, my hand happened to touch my flute. Hey! How did I forget my flute? My best companion in the crests and troughs of my life was with me! All others might have betrayed me, but my flute never did. Now I no longer cared about my hunger or anything else. I immediately pulled out my flute and began to play.

I forgot the cold and the hunger pangs and sat down cross-legged, as comfortably as if I was sitting on some royal seat. Gradually, I became absorbed in playing my flute. As I became more absorbed, my hunger faded away, and I stopped noticing the rains as well. Only the notes of my flute kept wafting incessantly into the atmosphere! Truly, my flute had never sounded so heart-wrenchingly sweet before. I was swiftly getting immersed in its mellifluous notes.

I had forgotten my hunger and cold long back. You will not believe, but gradually, I was even forgetting my own existence. It was surprising! As I was losing myself in the melody of the flute, I found my memories slowly fading. One after the other, all my memories, those of Mother Yashoda and Radha, Govardhana and Vrindavan, seeped out of my mind. Now I no longer remembered Mathura or Jarasandha; I was slowly forgetting bhैया too. On one hand, the flute was being played, and on the other, I was forgetting my very existence. Now, even my mind, my brain and the most powerful—my ego was dissolving into nothingness. I don't know what was transpiring, but I was sure of one thing; the melody of my flute was taking everything away with it! Gradually, it had even made me forget Rukmini and my teacher Sandipani. Now, neither did I exist, nor my near and dear ones, and neither was anything mine anymore. Only Nature remained. Only consciousness in a vibrant, pristine state remained. And as I remained immersed in this state, the whole night passed, and soon it was dawn. The first rays of the sun were now caressing me. Suddenly, my hand slipped away from the flute, and with that, I became aware of my surroundings once again. The moment I returned to my senses, I raised my head and looked up at the rising sun. Its celestial resplendence made me delirious with joy. In an instant, I stood up and leaped towards the open ground. For some time, I kept gazing at the sun with both my hands at the back of my head and the fingers intertwined. Then I began dancing, almost in a trance, lost in my own world. It was so incredible! I was the Sun! I was its rays too! It was really amazing! This pleasant morning, this lovely forest, the flowing river, all of it was just me...me! The flying birds, these radiant trees, the open sky, the wind, the moon, the earth, the rain, fire...I was everything! Why just this, I was Sudama and *Acharya*-mother too. Radha and Rukmini also were my forms. Jarasandha, Kansa had emanated from me, and I was *Acharya* as well. Oh yes! I was time too! The past, the future and the present, everything functioned because of me. What was there in this entire universe that was separated from me?

I was lost in this amazement, when the flute in my hand once again grabbed my attention. In a snap, I became conscious. I now felt like being with myself. I thought, 'Let me just check within and see if everything is all right.'

So, I sat down beneath a tree with my back to it and my legs stretched out in front of me. As soon as I sat down, I remembered that along with all of these, I was also Krishna, a cowherd boy of Vrindavan, trapped in this human body. Oh yes! This body too was mine! But if I was the all-pervading soul, if I was everything, then why did I have a separate body? Why did I have this human birth? It was amazing! The question was mine and it was I who had to find the answer to it! And the answer was present in the soul itself. Though this temporary human birth was a dream, it was real. Despite being a drama, it was the reality. This human birth had been created in order to enjoy our own creation. Not just the body, mind and senses, but even the brain and ego had been created for this very purpose; I was the master of these five entities...Yes! This was the truth! I was the *Parmatma*—the all-pervading Supreme Soul!

Wow! *Acharya* had blessed me with such a wonderful education! He had led me to self-realisation. He had rightly said, ‘If a person can lose his entire existence even for a moment, then at that very instant he can find his soul!’ My flute was truly amazing. It had initiated so many realisations within me! What does not transpire even after a hundred lifetimes had occurred so easily in my life. Neither had I made any effort or carried out any action nor had I desired enlightenment. Everything had transpired on its own. Certainly, now, I firmly existed in my body. However, my emotions were not ebbing or surging anymore. All that remained was the feeling of being the Supreme Soul.

Suddenly, I do not know why, but I again started playing my flute. As soon as the notes of the flute wafted through the air, my focus began to sharpen. My mind and my senses became active once again. I could feel my body in its entirety. Now, I could even feel the presence of my intelligence and ego. Gradually, I began to remember everything. Gokula, Vrindavan, Malini, bhaiya, my cowherd friends, Mother Yashoda, the gopis, Mathura, grandfather, Rukmini, *Acharya* Sandipani, all returned to my memory very clearly. And yes, even Radha had arrived to dwell in my consciousness. The feeling that was predominant at this time was a sense of gratitude. Then gradually, that feeling became more intense. Suddenly, I was once again in my past birth. I thanked Nature for the fact that I had been born such an innocent fool in my previous birth. After all, that was why I had been able to make the resolution to be victorious always, at the time of dying. I thanked Kansa’s extreme cruelty and Narada’s compassion, because of which I had received the opportunity to be born in Devaki’s house. I thanked Nanda too, for, had he not sacrificed his child, I would have not even been alive today. And mother... if I had not received her love, I would never have been able to reach where I was today. I was also thankful to the cowherd boys and the gopis who had played with me in my

childhood. I was grateful for Radha's love that had raised my self-confidence immeasurably. I was thankful to bhaiya who had always stood by me like a rock. I had to especially thank Kansa's paranoid and scheming mind, compelled by which he had become desperate to kill me. Had it not been so, he would not have summoned me to Mathura, and perhaps, I would have then spent my whole life as a simple cowherd boy in Vrindavan! I was also grateful to the Yadava leaders of Mathura who had pressurised grandfather to banish me from Mathura, because of which I had been able to get the opportunity to associate with *Acharya* Sandipani. And as for *Acharya*-mother and Sudama, I could not thank them enough. Had she not been partial to Sudama and had he not lied to me, my flute would have never played the way it did at night, which had succeeded in making me forget my existence. How could I thank *Acharya* Shrutiketu, who had taught me to play my flute, and *Acharya* Sandipani? The feeling of gratitude was too inadequate for all that they had done for me! Today, I was realising, with my own experience, that great teachers were truly greater than Nature. Really! So many people had played a part in this fascinating flight of self-realisation that I had taken today! So many people had been instrumental to my success. But was that enough? Did I too not play a part in all this? Certainly, my own intelligence had played a major role in helping evolve to this level. Thus, from my own experience, I can say with certainty, that if a human being develops his talents and flows with Nature, he too can transform himself from a simple cowherd boy into a 'self-realised Krishna'.

Just see the effect of self-realisation! My mischievousness, my dancing the *Raasa* with the gopis, my breaking their butter pots, my stealing their clothes, my watching them bathe, Radha's love for me, Rukmini's influence over me, everything was doubly pleasurable for me now! Meaning, at this time, on one hand, I had the pleasure of attaining self-realisation, and on the other, my mind and ego were also giving me joy. And both these pleasures were unique in their own special way. You are well aware of my nature; deriving 'joy' had always been my priority. I could never live a dry and dull life; and so, unlike other self-realised people, I had not weakened my mind, intelligence and ego because of it in any way. I did not consider them my enemies but rather the source of my joy. This was why once my mind, intelligence and ego were back, I immediately reverted to being the same person who had left the *ashram* the previous day to fetch firewood from the forest. If there was any difference, it was just that, now, I had become self-realised. By itself, it was but a minor difference, but yet enlightening and significant. Let me tell you one more thing. I agree that the Bhagavad Gita was the ultimate height of my consciousness and concentration. I also agree that it was aligned with Nature's flowing energy,

nevertheless, my role in it cannot be overlooked. For, the lessons I had learnt from my own experiences were its foundation. Through the Bhagavad Gita, I had conveyed to Arjuna all that I had ever learnt, all that I had experienced or contemplated upon, and all that I had repeatedly said and done in life. Along with the consciousness of Nature, my experiences were also present in the Bhagavad Gita in equal measure. Remember, when I had told Arjuna, “*I am the sun, earth, water, wind, sky and they are all non-different from me*”, this was the first experience after my self-realisation. I had been able to easily tell him to also consider me as the mind, intelligence and ego, because this was the experience of my entire life. Indeed, all my life, I had constantly lived with them. The only difference was that I had full control over all of them.

In all honesty, I attribute my success equally to Nature, to those who had become instrumental to my success and also to my own talents. To be very frank, and at the risk of sounding very conceited, I would say that my qualities were even more instrumental to my self-realisation than the other factors mentioned. I am not one of those who acknowledge the favours done by others and out of humility, forget the contribution that I myself have made towards my own success. Unfortunately, because of this very reason, many people considered me to be highly egoistic, whereas in reality, I was devoid of ego. Well, they were free to believe what they wished to. As I said before, the extent to which I had surrendered myself to my soul, to the same extent I had surrendered myself to my ego. For, after all, the soul is not visible. It is the ego that is meant to be visible. So, to negate its importance is akin to killing life. No, never; Krishna is that peak of joy which is all-encompassing. So, even after this self-realisation, I did not abandon my ego but became its charioteer, just as, during the Mahabharata war, I had become the charioteer of Arjuna, who can be called a personification of ego. That is why, as far as religiousness is concerned, the ‘wise’ call me the ‘only complete incarnation’ in all of mankind’s history. And they are not wrong; my awareness is supreme. Ordinarily, self-realisation is such a major event that it becomes evident whenever one achieves it. At least the people around the self-realised person can certainly discern his attainment. But my mind and ego were exactly the same as before. How could anybody recognise it? This was my state of awareness which was praiseworthy and which always set me apart from others. See for yourself; no one knew when I became self-realised. Not only that, nobody could ever find that I had become self-realised! For, unlike other wise men, I did not make any effort to disseminate this knowledge. I did not open an *ashram*; I neither wore the attire of a mendicant, nor did I leave home. Instead, after attaining self-realisation, I got married and settled down! One fact to be noted here is that I had become self-

realised very easily. I had attained it without studying the scriptures, without performing fire sacrifices, without meditation or formal worship. Enlightenment cannot be attained by all these anyway. Throughout the Gita, it is this effortless union that I had been discussing. I had explained to Arjuna, *"I cannot be attained by studying the Vedas or by performing penances, by sacrifices, meditation or even by worship. One attains me naturally."*¹² Just let whatever is happening, happen. You will reach where you have to, just like I have.

Anyway, for now, let me discuss this latest realisation that had come to me. This entire visible creation is pervaded by one 'Supreme Soul'. The entire universe, the earth, human beings, animals, everybody is full of that one 'Supreme Soul.' Just see, how easily I had realised that 'Supreme Soul'! The fact worth thinking about is that when everything is that Supreme Soul, when all the emotions are also that one soul, then why should one harbour enmity against anyone or hate anyone? This is what I had told Arjuna in the Gita, *"Know, O Arjuna, I am not just everything that you consider good in this world, but I am also all that is considered bad. The Supreme Soul is in all of them as well. I am the gamble. I am the ego as well. It is I who is the war."*¹³ Moreover, I had also said, *"Consider me to be sex for bearing progeny."* Now I had become 'God'; I was the Supreme One. But I wanted to become the God of all gods. Why just this, I also wanted to enjoy my life a thousand times more than I was doing right now. I wanted to enjoy my own creation. Meaning, I had to make a new beginning. I had to start on a new cycle of deeds. Agreed, that having the knowledge of the soul is the ultimate knowledge. I also accept the soul is all-knowing, and it is the sole witness to the creation and destruction of this world. But as it is tied to a body, one has to live. And if one has to live, then I would live by enjoying myself, while simultaneously taking care of my actions and duties. So, I decided that I would now live with even greater enjoyment; I would accept each pore of myself as it was. Actually, this was the knowledge that I had attained. And that is why this soul is the knower of everything. That is why I had said in the Gita that knowledge of the self is the most supreme knowledge. I had also told Arjuna that this 'supreme knowledge' is hidden within the self. *"Just like a womb is covered by a sheath, just like fire is covered by smoke, this knowledge remains covered because of one's attempts to obtain other unnecessary knowledge."* However, Arjuna did not have much interest in self-realisation. Throughout the Gita, he was mired by the knowledge of the scriptures and by ideas of common morality, which I constantly opposed.

Anyway, for now, let me discuss my experience of self-realisation which was different from others because of the existence of ego in its complete form.

Until now, the knowledge of the self, had been considered to be the ultimate goal of human life. But could a *karmaveer* like me remain content with this achievement alone? I wanted to fly higher on a new, unique flight, soaring to unprecedented heights. That is to say, rather than turning life into a drab journey by weighing it in the forbiddingly impersonal scales of knowledge, I wanted to colour the remaining years of my life with the warm hues of love. However, this was no easy task. I had to ensure that both my 'soul' and my 'ego' were firmly grounded in my existence. Remarkably, neither had anyone thought of it before, nor had anyone perhaps even imagined the possibility of something like this. What had been observed until now, was that a person's soul lies in slumber because his ego is much stronger. And, as soon as the ego dissolves into nothingness, 'the soul becomes apparent.' What I mean to say is that until this moment, the ego and the soul had never co-existed within anyone. But I wanted to demonstrate that this wonderful feat was indeed possible. In this respect, I can say that I wanted to challenge the handiwork of Nature. I had the firm belief that until death overtook it, life was an unending chain of actions, or *karma*. If one has obtained self-realisation, then one should think about the next stage. As such, once the soul becomes apparent, it will never disappear. And as far as the ego is concerned, it has fully manifested itself with this very thought. What I mean to say is, for the present, both the soul and the ego were existing side by side, strong and determined. Still, it would be better if it could be proved to be true. Truth is always self-evident. I stood up and walked back towards the rock where Sudama was resting. Now, if I could flummox him, then that would be proved beyond doubt. So, in this restlessness, I shook him awake as soon as I reached him. This was my moment of examination. If he was able to suspect even for a moment that such a great event had transpired in my life, then it would mean that there was some imperfection in my act. If not, then it would prove that both my forms, my pure soul and secondly Krishna, who was a real-life character at play, were established firmly in my personality in equal measure.

As soon as I shook Sudama, he woke up with a start. Seeing that the sun had risen, his happiness knew no bounds. It was at this moment that my drama began. Immediately, we washed our faces in the flowing waters of the spring, and directly set off in search of firewood. Now, fallen branches lay everywhere. The rains and the fierce storm had uprooted many trees in the night. Quickly, we collected firewood and set out to return to the *ashram*. This was my first victory! Krishna had proven himself to be just like his former self, just like I had been when I had left the *ashram*. Sudama had not noticed anything different in me! Perhaps my theatrics since childhood had a very important role to play in this.

The present scenario was that the event called self-realisation, which occurred in the life of perhaps one in a million people, had transpired in my life. Generally, such an event would immediately spread across boundaries. But I had succeeded in easily concealing even this fact from the world. Certainly, this second achievement was far greater than the first. That is why I say, there may have been many other self-realised people, but there was none like me. It is possible to hide the sun, but it is said that it is impossible to hide a self-realised soul. But just see! What had been considered impossible had been made possible by me! Sudama had not suspected a thing! Not that he should have noticed...that would have meant that I did not have the ability to put on an act.

Anyway, right now, we were proceeding towards the *ashram* carrying bundles of firewood tied with ropes on our heads. Truly, with the axe in one hand and the other hand supporting the bundle of firewood on our heads, our posture as we walked was very strange. Naturally, with such posture, there was no chance of much conversation. So, we were quietly trudging along, feasting our eyes on the lush greenery in the forest. When we reached the *ashram*, everyone was standing at the entrance, waiting for us. Naturally, the torrential downpour the previous night and our failure to return had everyone worried. When the news of our arrival reached them, *Acharya* and mother came running. Seeing that everything was all right, everyone heaved a sigh of relief. Bhaiya looked as if life had returned to his lifeless body. Even our friends appeared genuinely relieved. *Acharya* and mother also felt relieved. We were immediately freed of our bundles of firewood and escorted inside. On the other hand, upon entering, *Acharya* understood that we were exhausted and came straight to the point, saying, “You must be really hungry.”

This was my chance. I spoke very sarcastically, “I am really hungry. I do not know about Sudama; that is between him and *Acharya*-mother!”

As soon as they heard this, both their faces fell. This was my second victory. For, after all, I was a soul while the reply had been given by my ego. What I mean to say is, now I had become the ‘witness’ of not only Nature and all human beings, but also of my own ego. This was indeed a remarkable achievement for me. Now, I wanted to take this game further. Lost in these thoughts, I didn’t realise when I reached the ground with everyone else. Anyway, now, I was sitting with everyone else; but I was still lost in my own thoughts. Today, even *Acharya* was sitting with us. Well, never mind, right now my mind wanted to soar to newer spiritual heights. In a way, it could be said that I wanted to ensure the presence of my ego. I wanted to take such a flight that I wanted to use the soul, which I had realised because of my life, to discover life. Had I desired, after attaining self-realisation, I could have protected myself from the

terrible acts of life. But I wanted to choose the path of *karma*, for in my perspective, to accept life as it comes, is the only form of non-violence. In fact, I would like to advise all the self-realised souls of the future that they should accept what life has to offer naturally. It is true that after realising the self, there is nothing in this world that is worth obtaining and cannot be obtained. This is because you are in everything and you have already attained yourself. This is what I had explained to Arjuna in the Gita, *“There is no object worth attaining which I have not attained. Still, my speciality is that I am engaged in karma. For, if I ever cease to act, then the entire mankind would accept passivity as their dharma (duty) and I would become a perpetrator of narrow-mindedness.”*¹⁴ We all know that what great men prove, everyone follows. Whatever standards he sets, that becomes the standard.”¹⁵ For this reason, it is essential for the self-realised to be careful about their *karma*. What I meant to say was simple and profound. If all common people were to follow the path of the self-realised, then there would be no kings and no warriors. Then there would be no love - no children. Because of this, the world will first turn into a dreary place devoid of any enjoyment, and ultimately, all of humankind will perish. Meaning, due to this, not only will the hard work of billions of years be rendered futile, but the progress of the living entity through millions of births, from the microscopic germ to the human form, will also grind to a halt. In which case, what will the purpose of this universe be? Only in the human form of life, can the soul fully manifest itself in all its glory. Now you tell me, if human beings cease to exist, won't this vast universe become irrelevant? Won't the soul have to unnecessarily wait for billions of years again to emerge in its entirety? It will take eons to be born in the form of germs and then complete the journey till mankind. And it will take ages to be able to enjoy this vast universe again! No. Why should I wait? Why should I lose that which is easily obtainable right now? Bear in mind, the advice of non-violence and celibacy given by ignorant people can ultimately prove to be the greatest violence. For, would it not cause the human race itself to become extinct? And I want to preserve both humans and humanity, so that they enjoy this creation. This is why I had so easily been able to advise Arjuna in the Gita, *“It's me that you should consider 'sex' for bearing progeny.”*¹⁶ And you know very well that I never utter empty words. You are also well aware that I never objected to violence or sex. That was why I was able to instruct Arjuna, *“No one can kill or be killed. Life is eternal.”*¹⁷

Keeping that aside for now, let me tell you one more secret; this advice which I had given when I enunciated the Gita much later was not as much for Arjuna, as it was for the self-realised. This is the reason why I am the only

complete incarnation in all of mankind's history, for I had advised even those who had attained self-realisation. Indeed, much later in life, when I enunciated the *Bhagavad Gita*, my knowledge and my consciousness were at their peak. This is why, I had instructed those self-realised folk who go around instructing everyone around the world in the *Gita*. Hadn't I said, "O self-realised people! After obtaining self-realisation, do not renounce the world, neither wear a monk's garb nor oppose violence or sex. Instead, direct the people on to the path of progress. Discover new facets of glory, live like ordinary human beings, because in actuality, self-realisation is a person's own achievement."¹⁸ Do not unnecessarily renounce or oppose violence, sex, development or grandeur, thus creating misconceptions in the minds of the ordinary people. Human beings have such a vast capacity for advancement hidden within them that they can rule over the moon and the stars, provided the self-realised people do not unnecessarily recommend renunciation of action and develop a distaste for action!"¹⁹ Truly, it is my knowledge, awareness and vision that makes me the 'complete incarnation' as compared to all other 'partial incarnations.' However, it is also true that because of these views of mine many ignorant people consider me the ultimate egotist. Anyway, returning to the present, even *Acharya* had not sensed that something had transpired within me. This certainly was a special achievement for me. Indeed, if *Acharya* himself had not been able to sense that I had attained self-realisation, then there was no question of anybody else ever learning of it! I was happy! For, because of my 'supreme consciousness', I was getting an opportunity to lead an ordinary life in spite of becoming self-realised. Meaning, I was getting a chance to begin a new game of *karma*. Oh! I was lost in these thoughts and mother had called us for the meal. I was already feeling hungry, so I quickly shifted my attention from those I was sitting with and ran inside to have my meal.

Chapter 5

Clashing With Panchajanya To Honour Gurudakshina

All the secrets of the world had now been revealed to me. What was left to be learnt now at this *ashram*? But amazingly, I still continued asking *Acharya* all kinds of questions with that same fervent penchant for knowledge. What I mean to say is that I very easily managed to keep both personalities—the Supreme Soul Krishna and Vrindavan’s Kanha—intact within myself. Honestly, because of this, my stay at the *ashram* had become several times more enjoyable. Of course, the credit for this had to be given more to the witness within me, than to me. Meaning, everything at the *ashram* continued just as before, but now I found it far more enjoyable. Only a few days had passed since this great event, when one morning, something transpired which left me speechless. *Acharya* took me for a walk with him. It was early morning and the path that we had chosen was a lonely one. I had to accept that even at his age, *Acharya* managed to match my brisk pace while walking. He did not say anything special while going, but on the way back, to my absolute surprise, he gently placed his hand on my head and said, “Krishna, your education is now complete.”

I could not understand what he meant by ‘my education was complete’. How could it be complete? Barely six months had elapsed since our arrival at the *ashram* and so soon my education was already complete? I felt as if I had been struck by a thousand bolts of lightning. There were numerous students who had been at the *ashram* for several years, and yet their education was far from complete. Were we being asked to leave because of some external pressure, possibly from Jarasandha? No, never! How could I even think about *Acharya* in this manner? He was not the kind to give in under pressure from somebody. Then what was the matter? Actually, while thinking about all this, I stood rooted to the spot for a moment. On noticing that I had stopped, *Acharya* stopped walking as well. Now, how could the turmoil in my mind remain hidden from him? Immediately, he came close and patting my back, he said, “I have imparted all my knowledge to you. Actually, my imparting knowledge to you is not as significant as your ability has been in being able to grasp it. Just as the earth soaks the rainwater that falls on it, you too have absorbed all my knowledge. Actually, you have learnt not only what I had to teach you, but you have also learnt that which I have not taught. Truly, I am blessed to have a student like you!”

This accolade was totally unexpected. I had received the highest

recognition for my ability to learn. I was elated on hearing this, and I quickly began walking again. And as I walked, I began contemplating again. *Acharya* was right; I deserved this recognition. Truly, my determination to learn and my ability to absorb knowledge was beyond compare. I was anxious to glean knowledge from every moment, every incident. Then another thought struck me, ‘Wait! My education had ended but what about bhaiya? I promptly popped the very same question to *Acharya*, “And what about bhaiya?”

“He too has learnt all that he can possibly learn, and I too have taught him all that I can possibly teach him,” *Acharya* said.

In short, both of us were being let out from the *ashram* at the same time. At any rate, what would I have done after coming out of the *ashram* without bhaiya? Besides, bhaiya too could not think of spending even a few minutes at the *ashram* without me. It was good that the matter had been resolved without us having to disobey *Acharya*. Meanwhile, we had reached the *ashram* and it was then that trouble began to brew. My mind was compelled to find solitude and think in a thousand different directions. And of course, there was no dearth of isolated spots at the *ashram*. So, I descended a few steps from the backyard of the *ashram* and sat down underneath a tree, gazing at the flowing waters of the Kshipra River. The most important aspect of the current situation was that we were back to square one. Meaning, we were back to the point from where we had started. What I mean to say is, since our education was now complete, we obviously, would not be able to continue to stay at the *ashram* for long, and as soon as we stepped outside, the threat of Jarasandha would once again begin to haunt us. In fact, just a few days earlier, grandfather’s spies had come to the *ashram*. Grandfather had sent them here to convey to me the latest news of the state of affairs in Mathura. According to them, Jarasandha had indeed come to attack Mathura, but when he realised that we were no longer there, he had returned without attacking the city. But the trouble had not ended there. Furious, he had instructed all the kings who were his allies to imprison us the moment they saw us, and to immediately inform him about it. This clearly implied that we had been safe until now, solely because we were staying at the *ashram*. In other words, we had to prepare ourselves to live without a safe haven once again. For, given the circumstances, Mathura would not give us refuge, and no matter where else we went, the fear of being captured by Jarasandha would inexorably haunt us. And besides, we hardly had any money to go anywhere far. So, the question was, where would we go and how would we live? Agreed, we were accustomed to living in small houses in Gokula and Vrindavan, and the *ashram* had taught us everything else we needed to learn in terms of leading an austere life. What I mean to say is, *Acharya* had taught us very well how to sleep on the

ground in the cold and rain, and that too, without any blankets. So, even if I were to not consider this as a major impediment, the question of saving ourselves from Jarasandha and finding a place to stay still remained unresolved. Well, even so, when had I ever taken a decision all by myself? I had always waited for Nature to show me a sign. This was because I clearly believed that the one who had created us was also prepared to take our responsibility, provided we surrendered ourselves to him.

In any case, merely thinking of the problem was not a solution. So, I spent some time in calming my mind and enjoying the view of the gurgling river. Once calmed, I returned to the *ashram* with slow, yet steady steps. According to *Acharya*'s instructions, we were to leave the *ashram* after three days, so what was the need to trouble myself so soon? It was better that I lived to the fullest and made these last three days memorable. We could think of the future after we left the *ashram*. In fact, even *Acharya* was engaged in making these three days memorable for us, so much so, that he had relaxed all the rules of the *ashram* in my honour for these days. Surprisingly, not just us but even all the other students were freed from all the rules and regulations of the *ashram* for these three days. Moreover, even the daily classes had come to a stop. Meaning our last three days at the *ashram* were exclusively for happiness, joy, fun and feasting! As a result, my flute and Sudama's songs resonated in the *ashram* every morning, noon and evening, for all those three days. Moreover, we were also served sweets and savouries at dinnertime; we were thrilled beyond words. Bhaiya and I, actually bhaiya in particular, would ravenously attack the delicious food that was being served. Although there was a general atmosphere of festivity in the *ashram* during these days, it was not without an undercurrent of sadness. Our friends were happy that the rules had been relaxed, but at the same time, they were also sad that we were leaving the *ashram*. Strangely, the unhappiest among them all was *Acharya* himself. He had truly grown very fond of me in the short time we were at the *ashram*.

Anyway, the exception amongst us was bhaiya, who was delighted beyond words at the prospect of leaving the *ashram* and returning to Mathura. To tell you the truth, his delight was making me anxious, because the present circumstances in Mathura were not conducive to our returning. Thus, before his delight suddenly turned into despondency, I thought it best to gradually break the news to him and make him understand what the circumstances were. I was forced to reveal a part of the truth about the perilous situation we were in. Reluctantly, I had to reveal to him the conditions prevailing in Mathura and the opinion of the royal court of Mathura. However, I lied completely about one thing. Yes, I placed the blame for the situation squarely on the Yadava leaders'

shoulders. I told him that grandfather and father had strongly opposed this decision; in this way, I had hidden the truth about father's state of mind. The reason was simple: I did not want bhaiya to think ill of father. Really, what a beautiful tool lies can be...if they are not used for selfish purposes!

But bhaiya was one of a kind! He was not going to let me sit in peace. Instead of getting worried after hearing all this, he became furious with Jarasandha. Shouting angrily at the top of his voice, he declared, "I will not wait for him to find me. I will myself go and kill him!" This was now a new problem that was presenting itself. I agree that bhaiya was brave, but he did not possess the intelligence that ought to temper such raw courage. Wouldn't his army destroy us in a flash? Jarasandha would not come alone and say, "Come Balarama, let us fight one to one!" But there was no point explaining all this to bhaiya. He was not depressed at not being able to return to Mathura and that was enough for me. I had to be content with the fact that he had at least accepted that we were not going back to Mathura. However, the difficulties did not end here. I had thought that I would just enjoy myself in these last three days at the *ashram*, but here I was, caught up in the problems of the future! It was certain that we could not return to Mathura, but then we still had to think, where else we could go if not Mathura? The problem had been compounded because I could not even discuss with bhaiya which kingdom we could seek refuge in, due to his fiery temperament. The need of the hour was that we needed to take refuge in a kingdom that was inimical to Jarasandha's interests, and the one who follows the need of the hour is certainly wise. Had I suggested this to bhaiya, he would have become furious and declared that he was not afraid of Jarasandha. I gave up and thought, when the need of the hour is to be frightened, but bhaiya is still not getting scared, then this is not his bravery, but sheer foolishness! Now who could convince him that every such foolish act by man has ultimately proved to be an attempt at suicide?

In short, we were currently left to our own devices; we had no money, no shelter, and were completely helpless. Moreover, the most powerful King of the Aryavarta belt, Jarasandha, was baying for our blood. In such a case, where could we go? What could we do? The problem was so complicated that there appeared to be no solution in sight. We neither had any money or the resources to go anywhere, nor did we have any place to live, or anybody who was in a position to offer us shelter. We had been to no other place except Mathura and Ujjaini, so, where and how far could we go on foot? Meaning, we poor brothers were out on a limb. Well, regardless, when there is truly nothing that one can do, then the last resort is to leave it to the justice of Nature; and that is precisely what I did too. I understood the game being played by Nature. If Nature desired

to protect us from Jarasandha, it would surely direct us to some safe destination. Meaning, if we were meant to be saved, we would find some other safe haven, just like the last time, when we had found shelter in *Acharya* Sandipani's *ashram*, otherwise we would wait and see what course life would take us on. Was the plan or thought of seeking shelter in *Acharya* Sandipani's *ashram* my own? I had not even known *Acharya* at that time! Thus, if Nature desired, it would surely reveal to us the next secure shelter, in which case we would be saved. Well if not, then we could merely assume that our time had indeed run out. How difficult could it be for a self-realised person to understand this simple truth? In fact, people's lives are filled with complications only because of their stubborn insistence on going against Nature. Man wants to take all the decisions of life using his intelligence, but the fact is, many important decisions in life have to be left to Nature's discretion. And this confidence of mine was not based on blind faith, but on the experiences of my life that were loudly proclaiming this fact. I had to face numerous incidents in my life where I had courted death, and yet, here I was, alive and well! Was this not enough reason to infer this truth? I reasoned in this manner and quickly freed myself from anxiety. For, I also knew the truth that Nature does not help overly anxious people. On the other hand, the experience of my life until now was also saying that irrespective of what had happened to me, the final outcome had always been positive; so why would it be any different this time around? Nature, with its farsightedness, often sends us trouble for our own good and we, because of our short-sightedness, consider it an ordeal and become entangled in it.

All in all, apart from these worries and contemplation of mine, the last three days at the *ashram* were splendid. Now, it was time to put this peaceful and secure life at the *ashram* behind us as we had to leave early the next morning. We did not have many possessions to pack. Let alone packing, we did not even have a chariot for our journey. So, having got ready, early in the morning, we stepped out of our chamber. I was in a state of anxiety and *bhaiya* was all excited. Everyone was waiting for us in the open area outside our living quarters and we also reached there. The ambience was indeed quite despondent. Along with mother and our friends, even *Acharya* was unhappy. We chatted awhile with everyone, ate some fruits with relish that mother had cut for us and set off for the main gate. I was walking ahead with *Acharya*, while *bhaiya* walked behind with the others. There was no question of grandfather having any inkling that our education at the *ashram* would be over in such a short time. If he had, he would have definitely sent a chariot for us. No matter what the reason was, the result was that we had to begin the next phase of our journey on foot. But it did not matter as I was in any case ready for any and every eventuality. We crossed

the entrance and warmly embraced all our friends, Sudama, Shwetketu, Vinda, Anuvinda and the rest. Then we touched the feet of *Acharya* and *Acharya*-mother and took their blessings. Thereafter, we set off on the most arduous journey of our life. It was then that Vinda and Anuvinda realised that we did not have a chariot, and offered to arrange for one; but I found this offer fraught with danger. They were, after all, Rukmi's friends, and Rukmi was under the influence of Jarasandha. Taking a chariot from them would entail leaving a trail. No! Never! Rather than getting caught and slaughtered by Jarasandha, we preferred to walk. Even as we were leaving, *Acharya* placed a hand on my head and said something in which I found great solace. He said, "Krishna, you have become more of a friend to me than a student. Whenever you pass this way, please do come and stay with us without any hesitation. You are like my son; therefore, from today, I would like you to consider this *ashram* as your home." Needless to say, *Acharya*'s words, spoken at this difficult juncture in life, touched my heart. In our current situation, we were anyway in dire need of solace and good wishes. I felt justifiably proud for having received such love as well as knowledge from *Acharya*.

But for some reason, the moment *Acharya* referred to me as a son, *Acharya*-mother's eyes welled up with tears and soon, she lost all control and began weeping. *Acharya* was alarmed on seeing this outburst of tears and tried to console her. I could not understand what was going on. The entire scenario was beyond my comprehension. Not just me, everyone was dumbfounded on seeing mother crying in the arms of *Acharya*. The scene only added to the gloom in the atmosphere. After some time, I could no longer control myself. I mean, for how long could I just stand there and see mother weeping so inconsolably? I somehow mustered courage and asked her, "What is the matter, mother? Is there anything that I can do to take away your sorrow?"

Hearing my voice, mother composed herself. She quickly wiped her tears and replied, "No, no, it is nothing. It is just that I remembered my son."

I was surprised, "Your son! Where is he?"

This time, *Acharya* replied, "Our only son, Punardutta, was kidnapped twelve years ago when he was just five years old, by a demon named Panchajanya."

"But why?" I asked in bewilderment.

Acharya said, "Because he wanted me to educate his son at my *ashram*."

On hearing this, I concluded for him and said, "And, you were not ready to take his son as your student?"

"But Krishna, how could I? If a teacher succumbs to pressure and fear, then what does he have left to teach to his students? Think about it, Krishna, if

the *Acharya* of the *ashram* himself gets caught up in attachment towards his children, then how can he teach the students of the *ashram* to become free of attachment?”

Truly, both *Acharya* and his teachings had no comparison! I was really fortunate to have had the opportunity to receive tutelage from such a great teacher. Even though I had gained all the knowledge after my self-realisation, my learning still continued. For, the one who truly had this knowledge was the soul. I wanted to take my mind, intelligence and ego to that height where even they could attain all the knowledge. I wanted every atom of my body to be enlightened. Indeed, by the time the Mahabharata war took place, I had already attained this wonderful state. This is why, throughout the Gita, I had been able to use the terms ‘Me’ and ‘I’ to represent Nature. Who else has ever been able to do this till today? Nobody! Who will be able to do this in the future? Perhaps, no one! This is why I, Krishna am unique!

Well, I may have been unique, but at the moment I was not alone, so I looked deep into *Acharya*-mother’s tear-filled eyes. Though they were silent, they seemed to eloquently express all that needed to be said. And for me, her helplessness was akin to my command. What had I not obtained after coming to this *ashram*? I had not only gained knowledge from *Acharya*’s teachings and love, but with his blessings, I had also attained self-realisation. Thus, it was my duty to dedicate the rest of my life to their happiness. If *Acharya* had not accepted me as a student, I would not have been alive to see this day. Jarasandha would have eliminated me much earlier. Also, once we left the *ashram*, our lives were anyway going to be under constant threat. We could not go to Mathura, and wherever we went, Jarasandha and his spies would find us. So, when we were destined to wander about in the shadow of death, why not die while attempting to wipe *Acharya*-mother’s tears?

In fact, what greater happiness could there be for me than having the opportunity to wipe away the sorrow of my great teacher? An opportunity such as this, which allowed one to express one’s gratitude towards a great teacher, was rare indeed. More importantly, we were in a dilemma about where to go. Thus, when this mission presented itself, I immediately took it as a sign from Nature. Therefore, without thinking too much about the consequences, I consoled *Acharya*-mother by saying, “I promise that if your son Punardutta is alive, I will surely bring him back to you. This would be my *gurudakshina* to this great teacher.”²⁰

Hearing this, *Acharya*-mother stepped forward and embraced me. I became completely emotional when she took me in her arms. *Acharya* was still

standing beside mother and this entire scene was playing out at the main gates with all our friends still standing around us. Hearing me, some were delighted, some were astonished, while a few looked worried. Bhaiya was not concerned with all this; he was still in high spirits, enjoying his release from the *ashram*. But curiously, there was still no response from *Acharya*. No matter the reason for his silence, one thing was certain; he seemed far from happy with my proposal. And after a few moments, he expressed his objection to this proposal, “No, Krishna. Panchajanya is a very powerful demon. He is, in fact, the King of the Dasyus and has a huge army at his disposal. For the sake of one son of mine, about whose present condition I am not even aware of, and about whose abilities I am clueless, I cannot risk the life of another son, whom I know to be eminently capable of achieving greatness.”

I was completely floored by *Acharya*’s level of detachment and equanimity. Even so, a person who is trapped by attachment can never retain his equanimity. For his part, though he had expressed his anxiety, I was aware of my duty. Therefore, I questioned his anxiety by saying, “O *Acharya*, by expressing anxiety for my well-being, you are suspecting my capabilities. Even Kansa had had an army, and even Keshi was extremely powerful, but still I had slain them. What matters is whether your goal is right or not, and how resolute you are to achieve that goal. At any rate, I will be indebted to you for the rest of my life, for the knowledge that you have imparted to me. Therefore, please give me this opportunity to bring back your son Punardutta and express my gratitude.”

After some convincing, *Acharya* finally relented and gave his consent. Consequently, our departure from the *ashram* too was postponed, as it was essential for us to gather all the information about Panchajanya. Also, we had to make special provisions for this unique journey. In the next two days, *Acharya* provided us all the information which he had about Panchajanya. More importantly, he told us that Panchajanya was a demon who sailed the seas. His kingdom was near Kushasthali and the capital of this kingdom was called Vaivasvatpur. Also, Panchajanya apparently ruled the entire coastal region. Meaning, all things considered, Panchajanya was such a powerful enemy, that freeing Punardutta from him was virtually impossible.

But I did not care, for once I had become resolute about doing something, nothing could hold me back. Besides, what was the use of a life that could not be used in the service of *Acharya*? At any rate, it was better to die while trying to rescue Punardutta than to be hunted down by Jarasandha while fleeing from him. To sum it up, I had decided to go and rescue Punardutta. Fortunately, now, there was no dearth of resources. *Acharya* had placed his own chariot at our disposal. The chariot was old, but still in good condition. *Acharya*

instructed us to go straightaway to Kushasthali. There, we were to meet a well-wisher of *Acharya* by the name of Jaivik. He had quite a bit of information about Panchajanya. There was a possibility of him having more information about Punardutta as well and also, he was expected to help us with all our requirements. This meant that all the preparations on *Acharya's* part were completed, and now, along with me, even bhaiya was prepared, both mentally and physically, for this journey. Although, the primary reason behind his readiness to go with me was freedom from the confines of the *ashram*. He did not concern himself with contemplation or trying to understand anything else. Leave alone Panchajanya, there was no question of bhaiya being scared of anybody's might. However, ever since I had promised to rescue *Acharya's* son, my mind had become preoccupied in a new line of thought. *Acharya* had many princes from several powerful kingdoms in his tutelage. Why had none of them ever come forward to rescue his son, Punardutta? Oh well, the answer was probably quite simple; perhaps it is not in the nature of a human being to exhibit courage in return for a favour!

Anyway, our extraordinary journey commenced with *Acharya's* blessings, mother's prayers, and an emotional farewell from our friends. My enthusiasm and happiness knew no bounds. Bhaiya was happy too; for as far he was concerned, if not Jarasandha, he would fight Panchajanya! All he cared about was to be able to display his courage. Furthermore, as soon as our chariot left the *ashram*, he would also be released from all the discipline.

This was our second farewell in just three days. Meanwhile, *Acharya's* old and battered chariot was standing ready outside the *ashram*. The condition of the horse was not much different from the chariot. We too had reached the entrance amidst lots of noise and fanfare. Our luggage had already been kept inside the chariot. We embraced everyone and took the blessings of *Acharya* and *Acharya-mother*. This same scene had been enacted two days earlier. If at all there was anything different this time, then it was the chariot into which we jumped in after having met everyone. As a matter of fact, I could discern another change as well. While everybody had been despondent the last time, this time around, there was an atmosphere of enthusiasm. Well, we were not overly concerned whether they were despondent or enthused, because, although we did not have to face Jarasandha, we now had to deal with Panchajanya; either way we would have been walking straight towards the jaws of death! Yes, there was definitely a difference, earlier, we were going to die for no reason, but now, we were getting a chance to die fighting while performing our duty.

Well, if you recall, ever since we had undertaken the journey to Ujjaini with *Acharya*, a desire had kindled in me that how much fun it would be if I got

a chance to travel on a long journey like that again! A journey in which the reins of the chariot would be in my hands without *Acharya* or his discipline to worry about. It is said that if your desire is intense, it definitely gets fulfilled. And how soon it is fulfilled depends entirely on how intense it is. As you well know, everything I did, I did wholeheartedly. Therefore, it was but natural for my desire to be fulfilled immediately. At the same time, from my experiences so far, I had learnt at least this much that it does not matter whether you are good or bad, sinful or pious; the real question was merely about 'one' or 'many'. One strong desire can make you reach your goal, whereas too many desires can distract you and lead you astray. Often, a single desire, a single reason for pride, a single lie, or even a single act of stealing can prove to be a virtue. Meaning, it can get you the desired result. Whereas at times, too many desires, too much pride, too many lies, or even too many truths, too many favours and too much service could ultimately prove to be sins. If one continues indulging in them, then even though one may not desire so, they will have to face failure. Thereafter, no matter what names you give to glorify these actions, it makes no difference. It must be understood that focussed awareness is the soul, whereas awareness which is divided, is the ego. To do one thing at a time is *yoga* whereas to attempt to do several things at a time is *kaam* (greed). Consequently, a *yogi* will always be successful and happy, whereas a *kaami* (one who is driven solely by his greed) will always be unsuccessful and unhappy. And I was a *yogi* not only in soul but also in mind. Perhaps that was why this enchanting dream of mine had turned into reality in such a short span of time!

Well, now that the dream had come true, it was obvious that I was bound to enjoy it to the hilt. Though the chariot was rickety, the reins were in my hands and bhaiya was sitting beside me, so how long could it take for us to cross Ujjaini? And once we had crossed the city, it seemed as if the two of us were on wings. The beautiful scene outside and the rush of the cool breeze was exhilarating. By afternoon, we had entered the forest. We felt extremely ravenous on seeing the fruit and flower trees in the jungle. And soon, we refreshed our practice of pelting stones at the fruits and satiated our hunger as well. Truly, it was great fun. Seeing the emaciated condition of the horse, I fed it with lots of grass and also let it drink water to its heart's fill. Naturally, the horse too was now our companion through thick and thin. Indeed, our entire journey ahead depended on the well-being of the horse. If the animal became unwell, how could we reach Kushasthali? So, not only did we tie the horse in the shade of a bunch of trees, but we also decided to laze on a rock for a while. Indeed, the scene had transformed into a beautiful picture. We two brothers were lying with the rock as our pillow, and over us was a canopy of lush green leaves of the trees

close by, one of which had the horse tethered to it, and in front of us stood the open chariot. I became so lost in this scene, that I attained *yoga* (union with the entire creation). At present, this was my *karma* as well as the fruit of having performed my *karma*. In fact, when one is in a state of *yoga*, how can *karma* i.e. action ever be separated from the fruit that it bears? Actually, man has gone astray precisely because he considers '*karma*' and its fruit as separate identities. This is exactly what I had instructed Arjuna much later in the Gita. "*Do your karma; do not worry about its fruit.*" If truth be told, there is no greater aphorism than this for a person to achieve happiness and redemption. But just see, in spite of it, Arjuna kept discussing the fruits of action throughout the Gita. And, I repeatedly explained to him that this battle was his *karma* and the joy that he would acquire on demonstrating his bravery in the war, would be the only fruit. Just as my *karma* at this moment, was to view this beautiful scene, the fruit of which I was getting instantly in the form of ultimate joy. Just think, if Arjuna had been in my place, perhaps he would not have undertaken this journey at all. And even if he had managed to set off, he would have kept me engaged in thousands of questions! He would have kept asking, "Why go to Panchajanya?" "How powerful could he be?" "How will we fight?" "Will I be able to find Punardutta or not?" "Will I survive this?" "Who will win finally?" Don't you remember, what kind of nonsensical questions Arjuna was asking in the Gita? And I was giving just one answer to all his questions, "The Mahabharata war is a journey and you are a valorous hero. So just enjoy displaying your valour. The pleasure you receive on displaying your prowess would be your fruit. Then questions like 'who would win', 'how to kill', 'why to kill', 'is it correct to kill relatives', 'will the result be a kingdom or a place in heaven', 'what did the scriptures say about all this', so on and so forth will be of no consequence."

Nevertheless, forget this futile discussion for now; the afternoon was setting in. All of us were ready to proceed ahead in our journey. We tied the horse to the chariot and our journey began. I was thoroughly enjoying speeding my chariot. Sitting beside me, bhaiya was enjoying this 'flight' under the open sky. The joy of liberation from the confined existence of the *ashram* permeated his whole being. There were mountains, rivers and towns on the way. On seeing the towns, bhaiya and I would jump with joy, for there we would find shops which sold savouries and delicacies. Now, were we cowherd boys, who were so fond of good food, going to miss such an opportunity? As it is, we had been eating very simple food for the past six months and were rather tired of it. Fortunately, at the time of leaving the *ashram*, *Acharya* had given me some coins to help us on the way, which though not adequate to buy clothes and jewellery, were enough to gratify our taste buds with good food. If we really liked some

foodstuff, we would eat it, not forgetting to get some extra food packed to take along with us. In short, as the journey continued, we had our heart's fill of enjoying every beautiful thing on the way. We had even stopped by numerous lakes and other water-bodies along the way. Besides which, we even stopped and tasted every new fruit we came across. And if there was something that we liked, then we would collect a pile of it. However, riding the chariot all day completely drained me of energy. Consequently, at night, I would fall fast asleep as soon as I lay down. Seeing my exhaustion, bhaiya had voluntarily taken up the duty of keeping watch at night as well as washing our clothes. Of course, watering the horse, getting the chariot ready in the morning, carrying out repairs when needed, tying the horse and unharnessing the chariot at night were tasks that I had to do myself. This was because bhaiya as yet did not know how to do all these tasks.

Have you noted? My careful analysis of everything while journeying with *Acharya* from Mathura to the *ashram* was proving to be so useful! Nobody had taught me how to carry out repairs on the chariot or how to harness and unharness it. Nor had anybody indicated to me the importance of knowing such things. The truth is, if you have a strong power of observation, and have the desire to grasp things, there are thousands of things that you can learn without being taught. Conversely, if you do not possess these abilities, then you can spend your entire life trying to master just a single lesson. Take me for example; if like other people, I too had depended on some formal education instead of relying on my ability to observe and grasp, then at best, I would certainly have been able to learn ten or twenty odd things in my life. Lessons like riding a chariot, raising horses, repairing a chariot and undertaking long journeys and so on, would have taken me months to master. However, I had learnt all this myself, without wasting a moment, only due to my keen power of observation during the long journey. What I mean to say is, how much you learn in life depends on how fast you can learn things. For instance, looking at the princes studying at the *ashram* and gauging how much or how little they had learnt, I could say with conviction that without serious application on the part of the student, all the education he is offered is of no use. And, if I were to speak even more candidly, then I would say that such education is nothing more than a waste of time.

However, let me stop lecturing you about education and return to talking about our journey. During the long journey, bhaiya would often go to the back of the chariot and sleep during the day. Of course, this was because he had to stay awake during the night to keep watch. And naturally, when he was asleep, I would get immersed in my analysis to pass the time, but when he was awake, we would spend time chatting. At present too, I was enjoying riding the chariot and

feasting my eyes on the beautiful scenery and bhaiya was sleeping. However, there was just one unfortunate fact about this journey. We did not have much money with us. What could *Acharya* have provided us? As even he himself never accepted anything from anybody. Whatever he had given us, was enough to show his conscientiousness. Though I understood everything, the lack of money bothered me because there were attractive marketplaces in all the towns that we crossed on our journey. While some of the things available there were indeed essential, others were just objects of desire. Poor us, we could only enjoy taking in all the wonderful sights. At the most, we could gaze at them longingly, but could not buy any of them. And since we were very fond of eating, naturally, all our money was being spent on delicacies. Based on my current experience, I can say that there is no greater state of helplessness than to be without sufficient money. For, grandeur is another name for life, or it can be said, that grandeur is another name for need. But neither is everyone capable of enjoying grandeur nor is everyone able to fulfill their needs as per their desire. So, does that mean that a person who is not prosperous is doomed to remain unhappy all his life? No, certainly not! The human birth is intended only for enjoyment. But how can a poor person enjoy himself? Suddenly, my mind became hyperactive. Bhaiya anyway was resting and I was riding the chariot. Meaning, I had the time as well as the opportunity. My analytical mind got preoccupied with the search for the balance between wealth and enjoyment in life. If wealth and enjoyment are the primary goals of human life, then why is it that they are not simultaneously available to anyone? Is '*dharma*' the term given to obtaining both of these at the same time? As soon as this thought struck me, I found my deliberation soaring higher and higher. Remember, self-awareness just means recognising your inner self. I agree that attaining self-realisation is in itself a great achievement, but it is not the final goal in life. Thinking on these lines, I set out on a mental journey to seek completeness in what was perceived to be complete.

Now, I was experiencing how the lack of wealth could make a person helpless. Therefore, there was no need to dwell on this any further. At the *ashram*, I had seen that the princes studying with me were living with a lot of wealth at their disposal. I had also seen from their behaviour, that they did not know the art of enjoying life. I had always seen them either angry or frustrated. And when they were so unhappy within, then what was the use of all the wealth in the world? Moreover, I already knew from my experiences, that staying in a constant state of happiness requires a kind of art, whereas to become prosperous, one needs an entirely different set of skills. So, the question in my mind was, is it not possible for a human to cultivate both these skills at the same time? While I was probing this question, my mind set off in a different direction. But these

princes had not done anything to obtain this wealth. So, was it Nature that decided who was to receive and who was not to receive wealth? Would a person who deserved to be wealthy be born in a king's palace? Wait! This cannot be the case at all. Why should Nature be partial? Then is it that Nature gives them wealth, but takes away the skill of becoming happy, so that they remain unhappy all their lives? This did not seem possible either for this would also mean that Nature was partial.

So, for the time being, without any deep analysis, it was plainly evident that *Acharya* had joy, whereas the princes had wealth and prosperity. From my perspective, both were incomplete. So, was *Acharya* teaching them the skill of becoming happy by making them sleep on the bare floor? But as far as we were concerned, we had always lived like this, so what was the need for this lesson for us? All in all, the matter was getting too complicated! But I wanted my analytical contemplation to get to the bottom of this mystery. My analysis until now had revealed that the wealthy had to learn to stay happy, and it was the compulsion of the poor to learn how to become wealthy. I did not know whether the matter could be resolved in an instant. But deep within my mind I was determined to resolve this mystery, even if it meant confronting Nature itself. If Nature thought that only the people chosen by it would receive wealth, then I would shatter its illusion. I would definitely find the art that could make every person prosperous. Not only that, to prove this fact to Nature, I would scale the highest conceivable peak of grandeur one day. As soon as I made this resolution, everything became clear in my mind. Actually, the instructions for enjoying or renouncing this world are meant only for the rich. But the poor ought to be joyful and content by nature, like me. This was what my philosophy was all about, and this was my formula for turning the poor into the rich. Let me elaborate on it; if an ordinary person keeps prosperity in focus and continuously endeavours to do every single duty of his with joy, then certainly, sooner or later, his nature of remaining happy will itself help him scale the ultimate height of success. But keep in mind, one should not desire grandeur nor should one be jealous of others' grandeur; just be aware of it within. For, as soon as you desire grandeur, joy disappears and once joy is gone, then the possibility of attaining that grandeur is also minimised. Therefore, while enjoying doing one's *karma*, if one takes full advantage of every opportunity to become wealthy, consider that he will scale the heights of grandeur. So, will I too scale the peaks of joy and grandeur one day? After all, I too am performing every *karma* of mine with a smile and also enjoying life. Yes, absolutely! This means that if this principle of mine is indeed efficacious, then some day or the other, even an ordinary cowherd boy like me would scale the highest peak of glory and grandeur.

Well, only time would decide whether there was any truth in this formula. However, one thing that is worth understanding here, is that to be successful in this world, even a self-realised person needs practical knowledge of the material world. I agree that the soul is the knower of itself, and that it experiences all the mysteries of this world, but still, the art to become a winner in this world can be learnt only by acquiring the practical knowledge of the material world. Meaning, even the greatest self-realised person cannot reach the height of grandeur nor can he achieve success in this world, without acquiring practical knowledge. It is also worth noting here that it is easy to spurn grandeur, but to earn it is very difficult. Therefore, in my opinion, a person can be regarded as complete only if he is a king on the outside but a sage within. If one has to abdicate the throne for renunciation, then there is no change and one would once again be incomplete. In the same way, if a person were a king, but unable to find the joy in being one, then being a king would be meaningless for him. Meaning, a person can be considered complete only if he is content within and is enjoying royalty and grandeur on the outside. Once I had understood this fact, my becoming complete was inevitable. You are well aware, that even normally, I liked completeness. Meaning, I had already established myself on the summit of joy; now all that remained was to reach the pinnacle of prosperity.

A voice within me exclaimed, 'Excellent, Krishna! This is your greatness. You are planning to reach for the sky even though at present you are not sure whether you will live or not.' Well, so what? This precisely, was the sign of a resolute person. And when one's resolve is strong, then one can expect support from Nature too. Besides, at least this ideology had spelt out my life's purpose in this material world. In the current situation, there was enough time as well as opportunity for a *karmaveer* like me. At this point in time, I was poor, entirely without any means, and because of Jarasandha, I could not possibly find shelter anywhere either. Moreover, I was on my way to clash with Panchajanya, who was death personified. In short, our lives could not have been any gloomier than they were now, as we were not even certain of how many breaths we were left with. But I still thought that this is the right time to dream big, to dream of ruling the world. That is why I say that people should learn from me how to indulge in flights of fancy.

Our journey continued, passing through numerous towns, villages and their marketplaces, and we were enjoying ourselves to the hilt. I had the reins of the horse in my hand, the beautiful countryside all around, and bhaiya by my side. What could be more enjoyable than this? Our joy was such that we travelled for twelve whole days without realising how many days had elapsed. On the twelfth day, we reached Prabhasa. Actually, it was only a seven-day

journey, but because we enjoyed taking in the sights and gorged on food on the way, we took five more days to reach Prabhasa. The condition of the chariot and the horse was also partially responsible for this delay in our arrival. Prabhasa did not seem to be a big or highly developed town, but its primary attraction was that it was located at the seashore. This was the very first time that we were getting an opportunity to view the sea. Frankly speaking, the vastness of the sea was something we would never have been able to imagine had we not seen it. There was water as far as our eyes could see! Both bhaiya and I were stunned on seeing it. So, instead of taking the path towards the town, we turned the chariot on to the path by the seaside. We brought our chariot to a stop at a convenient place and just sat on the seashore, admiring the sea for hours. We kept gazing at the vastness of the sea and the unceasing waves as they washed ashore. We also walked to and fro on the seashore with no idea of how many times we did this. We had even left the horse unfettered, to go where he pleased. I have no recollections of how many different positions I had sat down in and got up again. We just couldn't believe that there was so much water in one place! I had even taken a sip of the water, but astonishingly, it was a bit salty, and did not appear to be potable. Maybe we couldn't drink it, but at least we could quench our desire for bathing. With this thought in mind, bhaiya and I jumped into the sea. I can't even begin to describe how much fun we had in the water! By now, it was long past noon and the sun was about to set, but we did not have our fill of fun as yet. We cowherd boys, who became delighted at the sight of small ponds and lakes, were certainly not about to depart from the seaside that easily. But we had to put a stop to our fun as we were on a mission to rescue *Acharya's* son and not exactly on a pleasure trip. So, finally, with great reluctance, we put a stop to our pleasurable activities and set off to go to meet Jaivik at the address which *Acharya* had given us.

As we were nearing the city, we began to see some people. Everyone here appeared to have a dark complexion. I was feeling good about the fact that in comparison to them my dusky complexion was glowing. For the first time in my life, I was full of pride on being fairer than them all. As soon as we entered the city, we came across narrow streets and houses nestled against each other for lack of space. This was also our first experience of seeing such closely built houses, but yes, there was definitely a veranda made of stone outside every house. The houses were so close to each other that one could roam the entire city stepping from one veranda to the other. The streets were so narrow that it had become impossible to manoeuvre the chariot. So, we brought our chariot to a halt in an open space and set off on foot to hunt for the address. When we found the house, it appeared very ordinary. The good news was that as soon as we told

Jaivik that we had been sent by *Acharya*, he greeted us respectfully. Besides which, he made arrangements immediately for a chamber for us to stay. We both were already feeling the exhaustion of the journey. After all, we had been on the road for twelve days, which was no laughing matter. Thus, even though we did not want to, we were compelled to take rest and contain our curiosity about Punardutta till the next day.

The next day, we had meals with Jaivik, who stayed with his wife and two children in a small house comprising two rooms and one meeting chamber. After our meals, we sat down in the meeting chamber. For sitting, there were just a few mats rolled out and we were sitting on two of them. At present, my entire attention was focussed on paying my *gurudakshina*. And it was focussed to such an extent that even while talking, I gathered a lot of information on Panchajanya from Jaivik. According to him, not only was Panchajanya a demon King, but he was also a dangerous bandit and pirate who had several warships. Besides this, he had a modernised and well-equipped army as well. As a consequence, he was able to plunder cities like Prabhasa situated near the sea at his will. Often, his soldiers even carried off girls from the village and no one was able to stand up to them. Eventually, seeing no way out, the citizens of Prabhasa began to pay a tax to Panchajanya every month to rid themselves of this terror. And to continue to remain safe and secure, this tax was still being paid. This was the only information that Jaivik could give us about Panchajanya, but it was sufficient for me. Did you not understand? Now whether you have understood or not, but from Jaivik's words I had understood that unknowingly, I had set off on the most difficult journey of my life. Certainly, the objective was difficult to achieve but there was no other option. For, it was not in my nature to retreat, leaving things half-done, hence I could move in only one direction—forward. But the question was, I couldn't see how I should proceed from here. Looking at it from this point, at least Jarasandha was a better opponent. At least we could flee from him, for we had not chosen to take up a fight with him, he had been sent after us by my aunts. But standing against Panchajanya was my own choice. I had got carried away by the idea that I had to offer to pay my *gurudakshina*. A voice in my head rudely interrupted, 'What do you mean you got carried away? After all, is it not your responsibility to wipe away *Acharya*-mother's tears?' I instantly stilled the voice, saying that it most definitely was. Besides, who would give up such a wonderful opportunity to repay one's obligation to such a great *Acharya*? It was just my ego which had become fearful for a moment. I had stilled the voice, but what were we to do next? The enemy was so powerful and alert that not even a soft breeze could waft through his territory without his knowledge. Then how were we going to do so? Well, however difficult it was, I had to

accomplish this task somehow. Thus, after much thought, I enquired from Jaivik, “What if a person is not able to pay the tax?”

Jaivik said, “Then he has to arrange for a person as collateral. They take that person with them and they keep him until they get their money.”

That was it! I had found a way in. I would become the collateral that Jaivik would arrange and in this way, I could reach Panchajanya’s capital without even having to fight. Once we reached there we would see what had to be done next. Thinking on these lines, I spoke to Jaivik, “Do not pay your tax this time. In return, we will go with them as collateral.”

On hearing this, Jaivik was alarmed. “No, how can I agree to this? First of all, you are my guests. I cannot let you become my guarantor. Secondly, the ruthless Panchajanya puts the people who are collateral through many hardships. I have heard that they torture such people as well. How can I knowingly push you two, who are my guests, to hell?”

What he said was absolutely right and I was pleased to hear him say it. What could make me happier than the fact that a person puts his duty before his self-interest? But even though he was right in what he said, I had to go as collateral in keeping with my plan. And when I had already put my life at risk, why should I be scared of what he may do to us? I thought, ‘Let him torture us; let him keep us as slaves. We will tolerate everything.’ Thinking thus, I made an attempt to explain things to Jaivik, “Do not be afraid. Actually, we have promised *Acharya* Sandipani that we will rescue his son Punardutta from Panchajanya as our *gurudakshina* to him. So, we have to get close to Panchajanya at any cost. You will actually be helping us by allowing us to become your collateral.”

When Jaivik realised that our intention was to free Punardutta, he didn’t argue any further. I too had gauged that *Acharya*’s pain was no secret to him, and he too wanted to see Punardutta free. Now I was also happy that an arrangement had been reached with Jaivik to enter the kingdom of Panchajanya. But there were still seven days to go for Panchajanya’s ship to arrive. There was nothing much to do till then, except spending those seven days in Prabhasa. So, here too, we set up a daily routine, where going to the seaside every morning and evening was part of this routine. We would have the evening meal at Jaivik’s house and if we had time to spare, then we would loiter around Prabhasa or go to the market. But a major chunk of our time was spent at the seaside, where we would also take our evening bath. We would sit for hours on the beach gazing at the sea as there was nothing much for us to do. It was already decided that we would go as collateral in lieu of Jaivik’s non-payment of taxes. We did not know what the future held in store for us, but for now, at least we could enjoy the enchanting

sea to our hearts' content. Of course, during this time I also tried to find out as much information about Punardutta as possible. But unfortunately, all Jaivik knew was that Panchajanya had kidnapped him. He did not know where he was being held or whether he was even alive.

Even with our routine, there was something peculiar that I had noticed in Prabhasa. Everyone here was very fond of wine. Although people of Mathura too drank wine, in Prabhasa, people drank wine with almost every meal. Drinking wine was fine, but the problem was that bhaiya had tasted wine and had indeed begun to enjoy it. Fortunately, I was saved from its influence, but he seemed to have started enjoying it. In fact, he had become addicted to it. Now, every evening, bhaiya would sit on the beach and drink wine, and I would accompany him to the beach and play my flute. I even learnt a lot of new words in Prabhasa. Not only that; the style of dressing, the food habits and the customs of this region were also vastly different from what we were used to. I was fascinated by it all and would keenly observe and admire even the smallest of diversity in this place.

The difference in our tastes and needs as such, could be discerned from the marketplace here as well. Everything, right from the clothes and jewellery down to the foodstuff in this region, was entirely distinct. The people here wore dhotis²¹ and clothes of many vibrant colours. In other places like Mathura and Ujjaini, I had seen clothes mostly in white, yellow, pink and saffron shades. Here people boldly wore colours like red, green, blue and purple. The marketplace here was also completely different from Mathura. Here, the shops selling clothes, jewellery and foodstuff were quite few in number. In contrast, huge shops of other businesses were more in number. It looked like this place specialised in ironmongery and carpentry. The sounds of metal clanging reverberated all day long from the shops situated on either side of the road. Most notably, the clothes of myriad hues looked very outlandish on these people who had a dark complexion. Perhaps, it was because I was seeing these combinations for the first time. Well, be that as it may! Right now, the matter of fact was that it was our seventh day in Prabhasa and Panchajanya's ships were expected at any time.

Even on this day when the ship was to arrive, bhaiya and I were loitering around in the marketplace. As we were daily visitors and were also Jaivik's guests, we had got acquainted with a lot of people. Although we faced a problem due to our languages being different, we were still able to communicate. At this time, bhaiya was trying to understand the workmanship required in the making of iron wheels in a big shop, while I was in a small shop which sold clothes,

trying to understand how they made these clothes. All of a sudden, people started running helter-skelter in all directions. The shops too began to close down quickly. Indeed, it seemed as if a great calamity had struck Prabhasa. Everybody raced towards their homes. The girls at the marketplace disappeared in a flash. Even as we watched, an atmosphere of fear and terror descended on Prabhasa. I could not understand the reason for this sudden change of atmosphere. Then suddenly, I heard the searing gust of wind whispering a warning, “The ships are coming! The ships are coming!” I then understood what the commotion was all about. Panchajanya’s ships had been spotted nearing the shoreline. I expected it, but seeing the terror on the faces of the people, I too was filled with apprehension. I thought to myself, ‘What have you gotten yourself into, my dear Krishna! If a person could cause such terror in the hearts of the people in other kingdoms, how powerful he must be in his own kingdom!’ Well, I should have thought of all this before I set off on this journey. Now, we had to face whatever was coming our way. Even if we died, at least we would have died endeavouring to repay our *gurudakshina* to our teacher. At least, we would not have died in vain.

With these thoughts, we too raced towards Jaivik’s house. Jaivik seemed to be busy today and also appeared quite worried. Moreover, his entire family was gathered in the kitchen. Many delicious dishes were being prepared, each better than the other. Perhaps, he wanted to feed us well before we went to Panchajanya to get slaughtered. Both bhaiya and I were delighted at the prospect of a hearty meal. At least we would get to enjoy a splendid feast because of this. But the reality was something different. Actually, it was Jaivik’s turn to feed the soldiers of Panchajanya, and the entire family was busy making preparations.

No matter, but on seeing us standing there, we were told to go and wait in our room and stay quiet. Abiding by their instruction, we went to our room and sat on the bed. But what could we do sitting on the bed? Thus, we started peeping outside the tiny window. We were stuck in a strange situation; we had already been instructed not to step out of the room nor were they coming to attend to us. Moreover, the wonderful aroma emanating from the kitchen was aggravating our hunger. Besides, it was mealtime for us gluttons. Even so, I was calm, but bhaiya was seething with rage. You already know that bhaiya could not control his hunger at all; these pangs of hunger gnawing in our stomachs, the aroma of good food, and the fact that we were being ignored, was too much for him to endure. He turned to me and exploded, “Just see this Jaivik’s wickedness! He has not yet called us for lunch. He feeds us ordinary food every day, and for these demons he is preparing such a fabulous feast! These people are certainly according their enemies great hospitality. I think it’s time to teach this scoundrel

a lesson.”

Clearly, because of his hunger, bhaiya’s ego was going berserk. He also felt humiliation at being treated in this manner. Firstly, he was extremely hungry and adding fuel to it, was this humiliation. These were indeed the very two things in the world that angered him the most. Now his ego and his hunger may have been his weaknesses, but how would teaching Jaivik a lesson help? It was a good thing that I was adept at pacifying him on every occasion, or else he would have created a furore! I at once began my attempts to pacify him and said, “Bhaiya you are unnecessarily getting worked up. They are not voluntarily hospitable to the demons; it is their terror they are scared of.” But in his extreme hunger, bhaiya was in no mood to listen, and had now directed his fury at me. Incredibly, I was paying the price just because he was very hungry! It was not as if I was not fond of eating, but in spite of my terrible hunger, I was able to control myself, and this could be attributed to the inherent special quality in my nature which made me realise that our journey to repay *Acharya* had begun when we first set foot in Prabhasa. Therefore, according to me, whatever we had to undergo or endure, was no more than the next step to be taken in the effort to offer my *gurudakshina* to *Acharya*.

Sitting on the bed in our room and watching the view outside, somehow this trying period too came to an end. Soon after the demons had departed, Jaivik called us. As soon as the summons came, bhaiya calmed down a bit, and as soon as he was served the delicious food, his anger dissipated that very instant. Needless to add, both of us devoured our meals with relish. Jaivik was amazed at our appetite. Bhaiya quickly nodded off to sleep after eating, but I found it difficult to sleep. This was because I knew for certain that this was going to be our last night as free men. The next day, we would literally become slaves of Panchajanya. I could endure anything but I was worried about bhaiya. He was bound to vent his anger at me. If just a delayed meal could upset him so much, I could well imagine how distressed he would become by the atrocities our captors were sure to inflict on us from the next day. I wondered how he would react! Whatever atrocities he would be forced to endure, he would vent it out on me a hundredfold. This trepidation ruined my sleep. I thought, ‘Upon reaching Panchajanya’s lair, should I concentrate on placating bhaiya or focus on trying to get Punardutta out of Panchajanya’s clutches?’ I spent the entire night preparing myself for the various kinds of impending troubles.

For from that day onwards, a new chapter of *karma* was about to begin in my life. I was to set off on the journey to pay off the *gurudakshina* to my great teacher. So, after lunch, the next day, we both, along with Jaivik, reached the seaside. We were wonderstruck at the scene that met our eyes. Near the seaside

itself, a huge platform, meaning a flat surface of stones had been built. Two massive ships were anchored to it. Now, we had certainly seen small boats which could seat two to four people in Mathura and Ujjaini. But these ships were so big that twenty-five such small boats could easily be accommodated inside them. On the other hand, not only was there lots of hustle and bustle at the port, but there was movement of goods too. Around two hundred people were present at the port at this time. Bhaiya and I were definitely looking conspicuous in the crowd. We saw from afar that a lot of people standing in a long queue were waiting outside a ship. Evidently, it was the queue of people who would stand as collateral and so Jaivik led us towards that queue. I was standing in the queue, but my wonderstruck eyes continued to remain fixed on the ship. Seeing us standing in the queue for people who were collateral, Jaivik looked crestfallen. He definitely did not find it agreeable to hand us over, as collateral. Actually, we too were not fond of the idea either. But it was also true that the satisfaction of having the opportunity to pay my *gurudakshina* to *Acharya* far outweighed my discontentment. However, the same could not be said about bhaiya. On the contrary, he was becoming increasingly restless standing in the queue. I thought it best to leave him alone. Why let his restlessness affect me? So, I turned my attention to the activities of the soldiers who disembarked from the ship. It can also be said that my mind had already begun engaging in a battle with Panchajanya.

The people whose names were called stepped forward and handed over their belongings as payment to the soldiers. Those who couldn't bring any belongings, were leading the people they had arranged as collateral to the soldiers. Inside the boat, the soldiers were accommodating both the people and the belongings in the vessel. By the manner in which they were seating everyone, it was clear that for them, there was absolutely no difference between the goods and people. Meaning, it was now quite apparent how our time would be spent in the near future. After a long wait, finally it was Jaivik's turn. As per our plan, Jaivik folded his hands and pleaded his inability to pay the tax. The officer at the table coldly looked him up and down, and then harshly asked him to present his guarantor.

Jaivik didn't say anything; instead, he turned, and taking our hands, extended them before the officer. His collaterals presented, the soldiers roughly pushed us into the ship and made us sit on the deck. This area of the ship was full of collaterals. Bhaiya was beside himself with anger at the affront to his ego. In contrast, I quietly sat cross-legged on the floor, as if nothing untoward had happened. For me, every incident was a part of my journey to pay my *gurudakshina* to my teacher. Then where was the question of honour and

dishonour? The place where we had been made to sit was the aft of the ship away from the hull. A special mention needs to be made that we were surrounded by soldiers who were sitting erect on the wooden benches, built along the hull of the ship. Besides, they all also appeared to be armed with the most modern weapons. I began to think, if the ship had such well-armed soldiers, then how much more security would their capital city have? Was this to be the last journey of our lives? For a second, I was startled, that I was beginning to be plagued by self-doubt. I immediately controlled myself and reassured my mind. For, it is the vibrations of self-doubt which spoil the results; and it is our confidence which proves helpful in making us victorious. With this thought, I once again focussed on becoming self-confident. So what if Panchajanya had a huge army? I too was a mischievous mastermind.

By evening, the ships finally weighed anchor and hoisted their sail. I was really enjoying myself. Like a child, I would keep craning my neck to see outside. I wished I could sit where the soldiers were sitting. I was sure, the scene outside could be seen clearly from those seats. But unfortunately, we were not destined to be part of this pleasure as we were slaves. This was my first experience of being a slave, and after this experience I can state with full certainty that there can be no suffering worse than that of a slave. Each of the ships held around fifty such slaves. I took comfort in this large number. At least, we were not alone. Besides, as they say, it is always better to be in a large group when walking into danger. On the other hand, by my estimates, there were about twenty soldiers in each of the ships. The ship which was constructed entirely out of wood, housed a cabin in the centre, with enough space between the cabin and the hull to seat us slaves. All around us was a wooden bench built for seating the soldiers. On either side of the ship, there were around eight people who were rowing the ship with wooden oars. In front of us was a huge net made of ropes, on the top of which hung a massive pennant. Despite the circumstances we were in, as the ship sailed, the cool breeze wafting in felt very pleasant.

We had been sailing for a while when the soldiers decided to show us what it really meant to be slaves. They went around tying everyone's hands with ropes. This was uncalled for, but still, I quietly got my hands tied. However, when it was bhaiya's turn to be tied, he twisted around and gave me a fiery look. He was right to look at me this way; for it was I who was the culprit. It was I who desperately wanted to pay the *gurudakshina*. Every human being has to bear the fruits of his own actions. But the matter did not end there. The soldiers were not content with merely tying us; they were bent on taking away bhaiya's plough and mace as well. This action of theirs enraged bhaiya further. He became extremely agitated and began to stoutly resist them. Seeing the situation

deteriorating rapidly, I jumped into the fray and tried my best to placate him. I explained, “Bhaiya, we are no longer free men; we are slaves. Just think, how can slaves carry weapons?” After what seemed like an eternity, he relented and reluctantly surrendered his weapons to the waiting soldiers. He had given up his weapons, but from his expression, it was clear that bhaiya was extremely annoyed with me. Firstly, it was not in his nature to be anyone’s slave, and secondly, if someone touched his mace, then it meant war! This was the difference between the way I thought and the way others did. As per my understanding, if bhaiya did not accept being enslaved now, then it implied that he did not want to rescue Punardutta either. To my thinking, he was shying away from paying his *gurudakshina* by doing this. Whereas, for me, paying my *gurudakshina* was my duty. And once I had accepted something as my duty, then from that moment on, I would surrender myself to that task. This is what is worth understanding. To rescue Punardutta from the clutches of Panchajanya was a major task; it was a long and onerous process. It was an uphill task to be taken one step at a time. For me, enduring humiliation, having my hands tied, getting bhaiya to give up the mace were merely the steps that constituted the climb. And I knew that only after taking many such steps would we be able to finally accomplish our mission.

It was good that I was well acquainted with bhaiya’s idiosyncrasies. And likewise, I was no stranger to the difficulty this task posed. I had, of course, anticipated that in the course of the journey, I would have to face two major hurdles. One, the difficulties that bhaiya’s ego would invariably bring about, and two, the difficulties that Panchajanya’s might would pose. I had come completely prepared to face both before I set out on this journey. I did not feel I was going to be troubled by either. Living with constant setbacks, I was accustomed to having struggles in my life, and now I had even begun to enjoy the struggles, considering them a type of *Raasa* - a game to be played. For, had I depended on Nature or circumstances to provide me happiness and pleasure, then I would have forgotten how to laugh or even smile, a long time ago. Actually, besides these two struggles, I was involved in another struggle with myself. I had to sustain my self-confidence under all circumstances; how else could I emerge victorious? Moreover, winning had become a habit with me! Besides which, I had to win this battle to pay my debt to my great teacher. And to emerge victorious in a great war, you have to work simultaneously on several fronts. This was precisely what was happening with me too. On one hand, my mind was busy gauging Panchajanya’s strengths and weaknesses, and on the other, it was keenly observing the activities of the soldiers. Although I was not overly worried about all this; my real worry was bhaiya, whom I had got along

with me. Needless to say, a considerable part of my energy was being spent in keeping him in control. Fortunately for me, I considered all of life's struggles as a game, and if one were to carefully examine the struggles in one's life, they too would appear as nothing more than an elaborate game. I am telling you the truth. For that matter, I was playing a game with bhaiya and Panchajanya's soldiers too. The soldiers had attempted to make bhaiya furious by tying his hands together, and then I had somehow managed to calm him down, thereby winning the game.

Then the soldiers who had lost the game had once again annoyed bhaiya by taking away his mace but I beat them yet again, by once again pacifying him. So, tell me, was this not a game between Panchajanya's soldiers and me? The only unfortunate part in this game, was that bhaiya had become the pawn in this game. Arrogance is anyway bound to be used as a plaything by other people. This is because an arrogant person has no personality of his own. He measures himself, his capabilities based on what others think and say of him. People generally say that two heads are better than one. But from my experience on this mission, I could say that one is definitely better, unless of course the two in question are perfectly synchronised with each other. But if the second person is of an arrogant and adamant disposition, then a lot of energy is expended in managing that person.

As we continued playing this game, it soon was nighttime, and we were enveloped in darkness. Our hands had become stiff on account of being tied up. But it was the night of *Poornima – a full moon night*, and the moon in all its glory was shining brightly. The moon always held a special place in my heart, so I couldn't help but lose myself in the beauty of the full moon. To forget our current situation on board the ship, it was better to shift focus on something pleasant. So, I forgot everything else, and lost myself in the magic of the moonlight as it lit up the ship and the sea. I was so enraptured by the beauty of the soft white moon that I began to dream of staying there. Wasn't I mad? Dreaming of residing on the moon when I had no place of my own on earth? Here I was sitting with my hands tied, sailing into the jaws of death, but still dreaming of settling on the moon! Tell me, could there be anyone more optimistic than me? There was, however, yet another aspect to such thinking. If the poor and the enslaved will not dream, then who else will? I was already poor, and now, I had become a slave as well. So why not act according to the dictates of one's circumstances? Dream and enjoy! Another point worth noting was that instead of focussing on dreams, if the slave concentrated on the reality of the circumstances, then wouldn't his condition become like bhaiya's? It is at such moments in life when it is essential to dream. Mulling over these thoughts, it

soon became time for dinner and pangs of hunger began to trouble us. The soldiers had already begun to eat, but why were we not being served? Alas, there was no dinner for us as we were slaves! It appeared that we would have to go to sleep on an empty stomach. Firstly, it was dinnertime and the hunger pangs were driving us mad. And to top it, the soldiers were devouring the food right before our eyes. I could take it, but as for my hungry bhaiya, perhaps even you won't have any difficulty in comprehending what he felt at this moment. You guessed it right, grave trouble was once again knocking at Kanhaiya's door. It would certainly be difficult to control my hungry bhaiya now. Well, no matter, this was all anyway a game for me. The only difference was that this time the opponent was different. First, it was the soldiers who were aggravating bhaiya's anger, now it was his hunger. I had to somehow pacify him and win this game as well.

Actually, even though I was very hungry, I was not one to fret over things that had no solution. Much later, in the Gita too, I had passed on this piece of wisdom to Arjuna, when I said, *'In life, one should not unnecessarily worry about circumstances beyond one's control.'*²² Anyway, bhaiya's hunger was gradually overwhelming him. His fury had reached its peak. It was imperative that I calm him down immediately or else he could become violent and create havoc. I redoubled my effort in my desperation to calm him down. I said, "Bhaiya, why are you unnecessarily becoming angry? The flames of your anger will only singe you!"

Bhaiya lashed out at me, "You keep quiet! It is because of you that I am in this predicament! If only I had burst open the head of the soldier when he was trying to take my mace away...". Saying this much, bhaiya lapsed into silence. I was just about to say something to pacify him when he again sputtered and spoke more angrily than before, "Spare me! It is easy for you to advise me. I see that you yourself have not lost your discus nor have they taken your precious flute!"

Just look at bhaiya! First, he was unhappy because his hands were tied, then he was enraged because he had lost his mace and plough. Later, he became furious due to his hunger and now he was on to an entirely new grouse. Why did they not take my flute and discus away from me? Now, who would explain to bhaiya that the discus and flute are not weapons? Why did he have to unnecessarily get irritated by comparing himself to me? But I suppose it was good in a way, for, at least his anger had finally found an innocuous outlet, as repressed anger often takes a more frightening form to release itself.

I forgot all this, when suddenly, for some reason giant waves began to lash the ship relentlessly. It was rocking so violently that besides us, even the

soldiers were greatly alarmed. Moreover, even Tamas, the captain of the ship, could be seen running on the deck. The apprehensive look on his face clearly indicated that something was terribly wrong with the ship. Soon, a sense of panic prevailed on the entire ship. My gaze was fixed on Tamas and my eyes followed him in whichever direction he ran, in the hope that I would be able to understand what was happening. But I had seen a ship for the first time in my life, so there was no question of my being able to comprehend anything, nor were we being told anything. In fact, even the condition of the soldiers wasn't much different from us. It could be clearly seen that even they were being kept in the dark. Still, one of them mustered his courage and nervously asked Tamas, who was still running hither and thither, what the matter was.

Looking tense, Tamas scratched his head and replied, "I made a mistake. I forgot that it's a full moon night today and hence the high tide, and moreover, the sea is quite rough. Now there is little hope of our survival. It looks as if the ship will come to rest only after drowning us all." Saying this, he handed over the oars to a few soldiers and instructed them to start rowing. But the truth was, the ship was being tossed so violently that I didn't think merely rowing hard would make much difference. Just see! Even before Panchajanya could do anything to us, his ship was conspiring to drown us! Truly, death and I had such an inseparable relationship! Death would suddenly come rushing from some direction or the other to tightly embrace me in its icy arms! However, I had clashed with death so many times that I had got into the habit of defeating it. There was no way I could hand over such a lovely life to death so easily. Difficulties come as a test of one's abilities and under such circumstances, if a person does not act, then when will he? It's in the time of trouble that a person has to use not only the strength of his body and mind, but also fully utilise the power of his soul. So, with this thought, I began to keenly observe all the activity on the ship and tried to gauge what was going on.

Even if I understood, what could I do? It was only now that I had learnt that a full moon night triggers a high tide in the sea. Now, how could I have known this fact before? After all, this was the first time I had set my sight on the sea and seafaring ships. Still, I had to try to save everyone from certain death at any cost. It was as simple as that. As long as there was life, there was hope. My experiences in life until now were proclaiming that 'action' is that magic which can ward off even the most certain of deaths. Finally, after watching the spectacle for some time, when I still couldn't comprehend anything, I mustered the courage to directly ask the captain, "Is there any way we can save the ship?"

Hearing my question, Tamas turned and glared balefully at me, but the next second, he was baffled on seeing me smiling. My calmness had astonished

him. I can say that my confidence in the midst of all these scared people had made me unique. This was the difference between others and me. Everybody knew how to be afraid, nervous and panic-stricken on every other occasion but no one believed in taking action. I believed in action; if something can be done, then it should be done or else the consequences should be accepted. But one should always be in a happy frame of mind. And now this calm, unperturbed nature of mine was bearing results here as well. Finally, my assured demeanour forced Tamas to answer. Speaking without much hope, he said, "There is only one solution. If we can somehow cut the rope holding up the main sail, we can be saved."

Instantly, I looked at the mast and then at the rope that was holding the sail at the top. The rope was indeed tied at a great height. Considering the incessant and jerky motion of the ship, it seemed virtually impossible for someone to climb up the mast, cut the rope and release the sail. Was there no way to save ourselves? Then suddenly another thought came into my mind, 'If death was certain, it would be better to die attempting to untie the sail, rather than wait for the ship to sink.' I was lost in these thoughts when suddenly my hand accidentally touched my discus. Now I had the upper hand in the game. This was not a difficult task for my discus. Perhaps this was the reason why Providence had not allowed the soldiers to take it away. I now had an opportunity to make an impression on Panchajanya's soldiers. Actually, it was impending death that had always shown me a way to live. As soon as this thought struck me, I naturally became excited. I now held the future of Panchajanya's ship in my hands. So, continuing in the same flow, I asked Tamas airily, "What if I bring the sail down?"

He replied, "Then I will do whatever you say."

I asked, "Will our hands be untied then?"

Before he could respond, bhaiya jumped in and said, "And, while you are at it, you will also have to return my mace and plough!"

Hearing this, I smiled and added, "Not only this, you will have to serve him a meal as well!"

What would a drowning man not do in order to survive? All our conditions were accepted. However, only my shackles were removed first. It was I who had chosen to act, so naturally, it was necessary for my shackles to be removed. I had merely said, that I will do the needful; the rope on the sail was not untied yet. So bhaiya couldn't be freed right away. As soon as my hands were free, I became the centre of attention. Everybody's eyes were now on me. All of them were wondering how I would climb the mast in the midst of such a storm. But it was not as if I had to climb to cut the rope. I had to just stand here

and show the magic of my discus. I immediately took it out and without wasting any time, took aim on the rope and threw my discus. And the rope came undone! As soon as the ropes were cut, the sail came down. Seeing the sail come down, all the people on board roared with delight. Tamas was beside himself with joy. The soldiers too were elated. Bhaiya's hands were immediately untied. As soon as his hands were freed, bhaiya puffed up his chest mightily and stood up proudly. It was undoubtedly a matter of great pride for him. After all, it was his brother who had just saved the doomed ship! And with this, we began to hold sway over the entire ship.

That was all great! But then, I immediately walked towards one of the wooden benches and sat down on one. This was one wish that I had been nursing ever since I had boarded the ship! Wave after wave lashed against the ship, the sound of the splash, and adding to it, the radiance of the *Poornima*—full moon! The setting was enchanting enough to put anyone in a blissful state. However, despite my immense joy at this scene, I glanced at the other slaves and their tied hands too; they were indeed enduring a lot of discomfiture. At this moment, everyone seemed greatly relieved from the sheer delight on having been saved from certain death. That is when I noticed that Tamas' face had suddenly turned pale. Also, he went and quietly stood in a corner. I could not understand what was on his mind. The ship had been saved and still the captain was unhappy; the matter was beyond comprehension. So, since there were no restrictions on my movements now, out of curiosity, I walked over to him. Even on seeing me standing by his side, Tamas did not react. But from his expression, I could clearly make out that he was deeply troubled. However, on prodding a bit, I understood what the matter was. He asked me with great humility, "Can you also release the sail of the ship that is following us?"

Now I understood the cause of his anxiety. Actually, it was a straightforward matter. Naturally, the second ship behind us would also be facing the same predicament which this ship had run into. So, the captain's anxiety was justified. Considering the precariousness of the situation, I immediately nodded my head in assent instead of being haughty. As soon as I nodded, he jumped with joy. Then with folded hands, he gestured to me. The meaning was clear, "So what are you waiting for, mister. Please cut the ropes."

I thought, 'Fine, I won't show attitude.' But I could do something only when I could see the other ship, right? We began to look all around as far as our eyes could see, but could not detect the other ship. Tamas was terrified. Perhaps, the other ship had capsized. But although he was worried, he was also very grateful to me. I had not only saved his life but also his ship. So, even though he

was gripped by worry for the other ship, he did not forget the mores of hospitality and respectfully led both of us towards his cabin, where we were served with food as well as wine. It was now that I realised that this part in the middle of the ship which looked like a house was actually the sitting room of the captain. Though the room was very small, it was magnificent. On three sides of the room, there were seating arrangements. Also, there were three windows to the right from where one could clearly see the sea. But as of this moment, our circumstances had changed completely. We were now truly enjoying ourselves. In contrast, with the passage of time, Tamas became increasingly restless. Just a little while ago, we were in chains and he was enjoying himself. Indeed, it doesn't take time for times to change. However, in order to establish a rapport with him, I enquired, "Why are you so anxious? At least, now our ship is safe."

He replied unhappily, "Yes, but because of my oversight, the other ship has sunk. For this loss, King Panchajanya will never forgive me. He will undoubtedly put me to death."

This was a matter of grave concern not just for him, but also for me. After all, I had just become friendly with an important official after much difficulty, and if he was going to be put to death, then how would I accomplish such a huge task? From this point of view, this was a matter of worry for me as well! How mighty Panchajanya must be that even his ministers were so scared of him! That meant that the adversary was exceptionally strong. That being the case, it was clear that any attempt to rescue Punardutta could only be initiated through Tamas. In such a dangerous and strange place, it was necessary that I garnered both the support and help of a friendly captain. All in all, it had become necessary to save Tamas. But how could I save him from Panchajanya? I mean, how could I conceivably intervene in the proceedings of a royal court? From the manner in which I was thinking, it seemed as if Panchajanya was at my beck and call, and if I asked him to release Tamas, he would happily do so! Whereas according to Tamas, the reality was that Panchajanya would not spare him and I would have to stand and watch him die. If that happened, I would not only lose an influential friend whom I had befriended with much difficulty, but all my hopes of freeing Punardutta would also be shattered. In short, whichever way I looked at it, I needed both Tamas' friendship and influence. Now, a person may have a thousand needs, but how he goes about realising these is what really counts. This was the issue here as well. A mistake had been made by Tamas, and the punishment was to be meted out by King Panchajanya. What could I do about it? I could not do anything, but the need of the hour was such that I had to think up something and do it fast.

Oblivious to this complication in our mission, bhaiya was busy gorging

on the food and drink. At any rate, he had only two responsibilities; to love me and to use his strength when needed. Since childhood he had handed over the responsibility of thinking and decision-making to me. And that was exactly what I was trying to do. I was constantly thinking of a way to save Tamas' life. The scene was such that three people were sitting in the chamber and the emotional state of each one was different. While Tamas was worried, I was lost deep in thought and bhaiya was happily gorging away. They say that if you ponder over a problem at length in the right direction, you often come up with several brilliant solutions. And that is exactly what happened with me. The thought crossed my mind that when there are so many officials on board, why should only Tamas be given the death sentence? Perhaps, because he was the senior-most officer on board the ship. Then it struck me; if I could find another officer on board who was in a higher position than Tamas and put the blame on him, then Tamas and my hopes could both be saved. With this thought, I asked him, "Tell me friend, is there a minister, or officer who is senior to you, on board this ship?"

He replied, "Yes. Our General Chandak is aboard this ship. In fact, the king has appointed him the Chief Minister as well. He is resting in a nearby cabin."

As soon as I heard this, I was thrilled and I confidently addressed Tamas, "Now there is no need for you to worry! Please come with me to his cabin. Inform him about the ship that has sunk. At the same time, introduce me to him, and tell him that it was I who saved this ship. Then wait and watch; how I save you from Panchajanya's wrath!"

What can I say about his reaction? He was already highly impressed with me and secondly, I had given him hope to believe that his life could be saved. So, there was no question of him refusing my request. He was back on his feet instantly, and so was I, and leaving bhaiya sitting there, we knocked at the cabin door adjacent to Tamas'. The cabin was not only bigger than Tamas' cabin, but it was also equipped with many more facilities. Chandak was sitting at ease with his legs stretched out and drinking wine. I was standing behind Tamas near the door. Now, Tamas was of medium build, but Chandak was extremely tall and well-built. His face was rather long, and he had small close-set eyes and a dark complexion. Interestingly, though not good-looking, he still had a very attractive and imposing personality. So, there was no question of my directly confronting him. The moment Tamas informed him about the sinking of the ship, he glared at him balefully. Then, after a few seconds of silence, he asked with a fierce growl, "How?"

Hearing his fierce voice, Tamas began to tremble with fear. In a voice

quivering with fright he said, “Actually, I had forgotten that tonight is a full moon night.”

This time, Chandak spoke quietly and in a cold voice, “Then be ready to receive the death sentence!”

Silently, I stood there, watching the scene play out. The only problem was that in his nervousness, Tamas had forgotten to introduce me. Seeing no alternative, I jumped into the conversation without any introduction and stepping forward to directly address Chandak, I said, “Can I say something please?”

It was only then that Chandak noticed my presence. He looked at me with disdain and asked Tamas, “Who is he? And why have you brought him here?”

Only then did Tamas realise that he had forgotten to introduce me. He immediately introduced me and said, “Oh! He is Jaivik’s guarantor. He is very brave and clever. Actually, he is the one who saved our ship from capsizing!”

Chandak looked me up and down, as if trying to gauge whether it was me who really saved the ship. He did not think I could, but since it was Tamas saying so, he was obliged to believe it. Then, addressing me directly, he said, “All right then, tell me. What do you have to say?”

Thinking quickly, I decided that a direct attack was better than beating about the bush. I may not get such an opportunity again. Indeed, the man might throw me out of the cabin any moment if he became enraged. Thus, putting on a worried expression, I said, “I have been standing here for quite some time, listening to your conversation. Do forgive me for saying this, but I think even you will receive the death sentence.”

Hearing this, Chandak was taken aback and asked, “W...w..why? Why me?”

His shocked expression clearly showed that my arrow had indeed found its mark. Why wait then? I had brought along the winning card with me. So, elaborating a little bit, I said, “As a rule, if a junior officer takes a wrong decision, it is the responsibility of the senior officer to set it right. I think the king will consider you equally guilty along with Tamas in this case.”

Hearing this, Chandak went cold. He understood that what I had said was absolutely true. Silence filled the entire cabin. But yes, Tamas definitely appeared somewhat relieved. Of course, he must have thought that two people sharing the blame was better than one! As for me, Chandak’s nervousness was like a ladder leading to success. Because now, along with Tamas, even Chandak was quaking with fear, and it is always easy to manipulate and control a person who is terrified. Finally, I had to break the awful silence in the cabin. Who else

would do it? Both of them were staring at the spectre of death, whereas for me, it was the perfect time and opportunity to strike. Thus, coming straight to the point and speaking with quiet confidence, I immediately said, “But I can save you both.”

In one voice, both of them eagerly asked, “How? Please save us. We will be indebted to you forever!”

This was precisely the assurance I was looking for! Speaking with a hint of self-importance this time, I said, “All right. Do one thing, when you are called to Panchajanya’s court for trial, tell them that I too should be brought to the court. Once there, I will take care of everything.” Seeing my confidence, they both felt reassured. As a rule, when there is trouble, a firm assurance from someone can have a magical, healing effect. And a reassurance from me was a real relief as both of them had already seen the display of my intelligence and strength. Along with them, even I was beginning to believe that if I was given an opportunity to speak to their king, I could definitely turn the tables. Just see! I had not yet spent even one full night on the ship and already, I had a ship’s captain and a minister of Panchajanya’s court under my control! Truly, very often, one’s goal may appear unattainable from a distance. But once you set your mind to accomplish it and steadily move towards it, then it never proves to be that difficult. As soon as they were reassured of their safety, both Tamas and Chandak became engaged in serving us. Bhaiya and I were now given the treatment accorded to very important guests by both of them. Additionally, we were even given a separate cabin so that we could get some rest. The best part about all this was that the bane—bhaiya’s anger—had also vanished. The special treatment, especially the food and wine, had won my dear bhaiya over. The whole scenario had changed. Both of us were resting in a small cabin of the ship. One aide had been appointed specifically for us and stood at our door. Until a short while ago, we were restrained with ropes and shackles which were put on when we had entered the ship, but now we were enjoying the best hospitality the ship had to offer. Well, it seemed as if it was now nearing dawn. However, we were so exhausted that we slept and then woke up only by late afternoon. As soon as I woke up, I had a meal and went out for a stroll. Now wherever I went on the ship, I received immense respect. Meaning, as our journey progressed, we were enjoying the hospitality, the deference and also the view of the vast sea from the sailing ship. The splendid treatment we were being accorded made it seem as if we were the owners of the ship! And when the journey is so pleasurable, one hardly realises the passage of time. After sailing for two days, early the next morning, we reached Vaivasvatpur, the royal capital of Panchajanya’s kingdom.

Bhaiya and I were standing in one corner of the ship's deck. The scene outside was beautiful beyond description. The sun had just started to rise and the hustle and bustle of the soldiers had increased quite a bit as we reached the destination. Right behind us, the poor slaves who came on board as collateral were still tied up. Even I had been one of them; however, this time I stood like royalty with one leg placed on the wooden bench, gazing at the distant fort of Vaivasvatpur. It was then that Tamas and Chandak came to me and with folded hands, both requested me to sit with the slaves. There was nothing to get upset about this. We were about to enter Panchajanya's stronghold now, and for him, we were just plain collateral. So, we quietly sat down amongst the slaves; I with a smile, and bhaiya, with a frown. Soon, the ship reached the port of Vaivasvatpur. Interestingly, the kingdom was situated right along the seaside. Just a hundred yards away from the shore and surrounded by high stone walls and ramparts, it seemed invincible at first sight itself. Moreover, to my surprise, the whole of Vaivasvatpur had just one main gate, which appeared to be made of iron and looked extremely strong. Despite that, many soldiers could be seen patrolling outside the gate. This itself was enough indication of the kind of place we had reached. Anyway, as soon as the ship anchored at the port, the slaves were the first to be quickly herded out. Needless to say, bhaiya and I were also part of this group. On the ship, it was a different matter, but here in the city, we were definitely not the guests of Tamas and Chandak, but the slaves of Panchajanya. And our 'welcome ceremony' took place accordingly! As soon as we alighted from the ship, all of us were made to stand in a queue. Even the soldiers who disembarked from the ship were made to get into formation under the command of Tamas and Chandak. Seeing this, I became extremely worried. When even the soldiers were being treated in such a manner, we could expect just about anything to happen to us later! And if such a situation should come to pass, would bhaiya ever spare me? I thought, 'Krishna, life is another name for trouble.' Then another thought crossed my mind, 'You are right, let the troubles come; now Krishna is ready for all kinds of troubles.' I was lost in these thoughts when on the instructions of Tamas and Chandak, we were made to enter the gateway under the security of soldiers. I did not dare to look at bhaiya, who was moving ahead in the line with tied hands. I didn't want to invite more trouble. Once inside, we were lined up in a huge square. Very soon, a huge crowd gathered to watch the proceedings. We had become quite the centre of attention. Just then, ten to twelve soldiers arrived carrying a metal cage. A sudden silence enveloped the square as the cage was placed on the floor. To my utter astonishment, the cage was placed onto a high throne. About twenty soldiers quickly stood in formation all around the cage. Within the cage was

Panchajanya! I was utterly amazed by his personal security. The first thought that flashed through my mind was, 'Oh my God! From whose clutches have you come to liberate Punardutta, my dear Krishna? Even the greatest King of Aryavarta could not possibly defeat him. Perhaps, even if all the various kingdoms of the Aryavarta belt were to join forces, they would still not be able to defeat him! You are horribly trapped, Krishna!' Well, if I was trapped, so be it. As for Panchajanya, he seemed almost twice the size of Kansa as far as his height and build were concerned. His neck was thin and long and his face was rather small. His stomach, on the other hand, was ponderous. But his legs were thin and long. So, on the whole, his upper and lower body appeared thin, whereas the middle portion of his body was huge. His body structure seemed strange to say the least. Honestly, from a distance, he appeared less like a man and more like a huge fish! Meanwhile, Tamas and Chandak appeared extremely frightened on seeing that Panchajanya had arrived. They were trembling with fear, and in spite of the cool breeze blowing in from the sea they were sweating profusely with beads of perspiration on their faces. The only 'action' they indulged in was to keep glancing back at me, with hope writ large on their faces! Frankly speaking, seeing Panchajanya's power, even I was terrified, but still, discharging my duty, I maintained a buoyant smile on my face to reassure them that I would keep my promise.

But what could mere assurances do? As soon as Panchajanya was informed that one of his ships had sunk, he roared in a thunderous voice and ordered the immediate arrest of Tamas and Chandak. His authority was absolute. Without any regard for their positions, both were instantly arrested. All my smiling seemed to have had no effect; with a long face, I quietly watched this drama unfold in front of me. What else could I do? Forget about doing something, after the two officers, it was now our turn to be arrested! We were all herded into a prison. Scores of people who were collateral were packed into every cell. Around seven to eight such cells were built adjacent to each other. For the sake of light and air, there were just two vents in each of these rooms. These cells, which were made of stones, had strong iron doors. Furthermore, two soldiers also stood guard outside every cell. There was nothing in the cell that could make it easy for one to stay in the cell even for a moment. But what other recourse did we have? We spent the day somehow, but the night was even more terrible. The dinner which we were served was disgusting. It was not even something which we could gulp down. We had been served with just raw flesh! There was no question of our falling asleep in these cramped quarters with our stomachs empty. There was no bedding of any kind. The only relief—if you could call it that—was that all our fellow prisoners were the ones who had

travelled in our ship, so the poor men were giving us respect and also trying to share our sorrow. As the night progressed, everyone lay down on the floor. Soon, the cell resounded with snores. We, on the contrary, could not bring ourselves to sleep in such a situation. So, bhaiya and I stood quietly, holding on to the door, taking a short nap every now and then. Although I was trying to think of ways to spend the night, I was not looking at bhaiya. I did not want to die! We spent the entire night on our feet. Meaning, in a single night, Panchajanya had made us experience hell, while we were still very much alive. You can imagine how much bhaiya must have ‘entertained’ me all through the night, without even meaning to!

Well, like all things, that terrible night too had to end and it did. But the circumstances were not going to change much in the morning. Our situation would change only if we were summoned to the royal court, and even that depended on the prudence of Tamas and Chandak, and whether they could succeed in convincing Panchajanya or not. If they did not, then not only would they both be executed, but we too would slowly and unnecessarily rot in this hell and die. To tell you the truth, after arriving here, not only our mission of rescuing Punardutta, but our own escape from this hellhole seemed impossible! But fortunately, the situation did not play out as I had feared. By afternoon, we were summoned to the royal palace. We could also see a ray of hope for our escape with this summons. We were immediately escorted by the soldiers to the royal court. Clearly, it was judgement day for us as well as Tamas and Chandak. My condition was quite strange. Surrounded by soldiers on all sides, I was lost in innumerable feelings and thoughts. This was, after all, my last chance. Very soon, my communication skill was to be put to its ultimate test. If I could not outsmart Panchajanya, everything would be over. I just had to outsmart him at any cost. But how would I do that? The ship had sunk because of Tamas and Chandak’s error in judgement. The punishment for this was death. In such a case, how could I save them? I was still lost in contemplation and did not even realise that we had reached the palace. Once inside, I was taken straight to the royal court in the presence of King Panchajanya. Silence prevailed in the entire courtroom. Tamas and Chandak were already standing there, bound in chains, as expected. But surprisingly, even in the courtroom, Panchajanya was seated in his iron cage. A large number of soldiers were also positioned all around. The matter was certainly even more serious than I had imagined.

As soon as I arrived, Panchajanya commenced the trial. Perhaps, they were waiting for me. Meaning, I had been called even before the trial had begun. At least, I could take this as a good sign. As soon as Panchajanya signalled for the trial to begin, the court announcer called out, “Tamas and Chandak! The

guarantor that you wanted brought as witness is here. Thus, I formally announce the commencement of the trial.” Then turning to the King and addressing him, he said, “O King! Tamas and Chandak are accused of negligence of duty. Because of their carelessness, we have lost one of our ships at sea.”

Hearing this, the enraged king shouted, “Tamas and Chandak! Do you accept that one of our ships has sunk because of your carelessness?” Out of fear, both nodded their heads in acceptance. This time Panchajanya continued dramatically, “Due to your negligence, close to a hundred people have lost their lives. Do you agree to this as well?”

Both of them again nodded their heads. This time however, both of them slightly turned their heads and looked at me with eyes filled with hope. I too reassured them with my charming smile. But honestly, considering the terse and straightforward manner in which the trial was being conducted, I did not see any chance of them being saved. And this was exactly what happened. Before I could even think of making a move, Panchajanya pronounced the judgement in a harsh tone. For him, it was all simple and straightforward. He spoke in a harsh, frosty tone, “Both of you have been found guilty of dereliction of duty because of which our ship has sunk and a hundred-odd people have died. Thus, as per the law of the land, I hereby sentence you both to death. You shall be put to death in front of everyone in the open square.”

There was no hearing, no appeal. The death sentence had been awarded straightaway. I thought, ‘It has to be either now or never...wake up Kanhaiya! Show some magic!’ With great difficulty, I had made these two senior officers my friends and now if they were put to death, how would I pay my *gurudakshina*? Thus, without thinking further, I interjected and said agitatedly, “O K...k...king, with your permission, may I make an appeal on their behalf?”

Panchajanya looked condescendingly at me and said, “In my court, collateral slaves have no permission to speak!”

I said, “It is true that I have been brought here as collateral. Nevertheless, I have come from Aryavarta, a region far across your borders. All over the Aryavarta belt you are regarded as a King of great wisdom, strength and a deliverer of exemplary justice. If you do not listen to me today, it is possible that you might commit injustice. Your name might be tarnished across all of Aryavarta.”

It was, of course, a desperate bid, and as I saw no other way, I decided to appeal to his ego. But fortunately, he seemed to buy it. It is said that all the weapons of the world might fail, but the weapon of assuaging someone’s ego never fails. This was exactly what I was demonstrating here. Rather than see his great name sullied, Panchajanya thought it wise to hear me out. Granting me

permission, he spoke in a stern voice, “Alright, because you have come from a distant kingdom, I will grant you permission to speak. But say what you have to say in brief!”

Perfect! I had got the opportunity I wanted. Now, you know very well that once I had an opportunity, then I could convince even the devil himself! Even Chandak and Tamas saw this as a ray of hope. I also took a deep breath and focussing the full power of my awareness, began to speak. I said, “O King! By awarding the death sentence to your ship captain Tamas and your Chief Minister Chandak, you have proved that when it comes to justice and wisdom, there is no one greater than you in this world. For, it is an indisputable fact that your ship has sunk because of the carelessness of these two senior officers of your kingdom. And by awarding such a harsh punishment like the death sentence, without caring about their designation, you have proved that your justice does not discriminate between the poor common citizens and the rich.”

Of course, on hearing this flamboyant little speech from my lips, the faces of the two condemned men fell; they felt cheated. They instantly assumed that I had forgotten them and was now trying to flatter the king. Well, they were not wrong if they were thinking on these lines. On the face of it, this is what it looked like, but I knew what I was doing. I was focussing solely on Panchajanya, and indeed, my arrow had found its mark. My praises ensnared his ego in such a manner that he seemed to sit up even straighter in his cage. And why would he not? He had just discovered that tales of his justice resounded all over Aryavarta! Seeing that he had now fallen for my bait, I continued with greater confidence. I said, “O King, but there is a small question in my mind. If you give me permission, I shall present it before you for your wise counsel.”

Panchajanya had already come under my influence to an extent that was enough for him to grant me permission. And this is precisely what happened; this time, he replied immediately in a calm voice, “Certainly, you may.”

I too spoke with great humility, “O King, I understand that the punishment for drowning a ship is the death sentence. But tell me, what is the punishment in your kingdom for saving a ship from drowning?”

Hearing this, Panchajanya let out a loud guffaw, and exclaimed, “Punishment! If someone saves my ship from sinking, he will be piled with rich gifts and commissions. He will be given loads of precious stones, ornaments and six, no, seven beautiful women to serve and satisfy his every whim!”

I replied, “O King! The ship in which we have sailed here would also have capsized, had it not been for the intelligence and courage displayed by Tamas and Chandak.”

Panchajanya, poor man, did not know what had hit him when he heard

this. His intelligence appeared to have abandoned him. He was trapped in a deep whirlpool of conflicting thoughts. He could not understand the meaning of this double-sided argument. I was certainly very happy on seeing him in this plight. Naturally, I knew that if I was given an opportunity to speak, I could bewilder anyone. Here too, within a few moments, I had turned a seemingly simple and straightforward matter into a complex one. Poor Panchajanya could not understand how a simple sum of two plus two had yielded an inexplicable 'five.' And, while I was laughing within, I somehow managed to keep a straight face on the outside. But, Tamas and Chandak were unable to do this. Their faces were shining with hope. However, the expressions on other people's faces were of no consequence. Panchajanya was the one who mattered and his condition was such that he was still trying to comprehend what I had said. Even after racking his brain for some time, when Panchajanya still could not arrive at any conclusion, I decided to assist him. I thought why not save him by giving him some good advice? Therefore, putting on an elaborate act, with great humility, I said, "O King! You have already punished them for letting a ship drown. Now you only have to reward them for having saved the other ship!"

Hearing this, Panchajanya's face lit up. He liked my suggestion. He had to, of course. After all, you know very well that I did not harbour any evil intentions and merely wanted to help him arrive at a solution. And, fortunately, he had arrived at it. He immediately declared, "All right then. Keeping the previous sentence valid, I reward them with jewels, precious stones and seven beautiful maidservants for saving my ship!"

Now it was the turn of the courtroom to be bewildered. In fact, on hearing this pronouncement, even I felt like laughing, but I somehow controlled myself and remained silent. After a brief moment, Panchajanya too seemed to realise that he had said something stupid. Tamas and Chandak also could not understand whether to laugh with joy at their king's justice or to cry. Everybody was thoroughly confused. In reality, I was the only person in the courtroom who was not confused. How could I be confused? After all, was I not the one who had created this confusion? And it was not a small one; its effect could be clearly seen from the silence prevailing across the courtroom. Nobody knew what was going to happen next. Panchajanya was constantly trying to dispel his own confusion but in vain. How could he? I had thoroughly subverted his intelligence. The situation was such that he was befuddled, and on the other hand, even the court was completely bewildered. Seeing this utter confusion prevailing all around, I felt extremely proud of the move that I had made. I was also enjoying myself to the hilt, seeing the bewildered faces in the courtroom.

Finally, Chandak could no longer contain himself. Speaking in a rather

vexed voice, he asked, “O King! Of what use are jewels and women to us when we are to be put to death?”

The king too realised that what Chandak was saying was right. The poor king slipped into deep contemplation. His courtroom had never been in such a muddle before. How could it? After all, I had never been here before! Poor Panchajanya! Already at his wits’ end, on hearing Chandak’s question, he held his head in his hands, racking his brain. Feeling defeated, when he could not think of anything, he asked me, “What should be done now?”

I was ready and waiting to help him. And now that the fish had landed into the net of its own accord, there was no question of disappointing it. Thus, adopting a very grave expression, I said, “O King! In my opinion, their punishment should be cancelled, and so should their rewards. This is because they have drowned one ship and saved one, thus the matter is settled.”

The king liked my suggestion. He immediately ordered Tamas and Chandak to be freed. Then looking towards me, he said, “Today you have saved me from inflicting injustice. Therefore, from now onwards, you will stay here not as a slave, but as a guest.”

In the depth of my heart, I felt so happy, as if I had conquered both heaven and earth. But outwardly, I said in a tone dripping with gratitude, “This is your generosity, and I am captivated by your sense of justice. Until now, I had merely heard of it, and today, I have seen it with my own eyes too!”

Hearing this, his ego once again surged to the fore. He lifted his head and looked all around, as if to say to the courtiers, ‘See how famous I am in the Aryavarta belt!’ He was so delighted that out of sheer joy, he took out the conch shell tied to his waist. I cannot tell you how beautiful this conch was! And when he blew into the conch shell, its sound reverberated all around. It had such a haunting and penetrating quality to it, that I was thoroughly captivated. Tamas and Chandak could not contain their elation. And as far as I was concerned, I felt that I was very close to my goal. It was certain that the great favour I had done to the two senior officials with this would have its effect. Moreover, I had also won favour in the eyes of the King. The situation was now looking good. As soon as the court proceedings came to an end, we were shifted to the royal guest house. Now we were no longer being watched by guards; in fact, we were now free to roam around the kingdom as we liked. Meaning, we now had everything; food that we liked, the best guest room and the much-desired freedom. Amazingly, this journey from being a slave to becoming an important guest had taken just three nights and this was certainly beyond bhaiya’s understanding. Although he was in awe of my manoeuvres, it was all beyond his comprehension!

However, we had not come here to enjoy. The sole objective behind

coming here was to free Punardutta. And though Tamas and Chandak were deeply indebted to me, accomplishing this task was not going to be easy considering Panchajanya's hold on his kingdom. For, the enemy was cunning as well as powerful. It was also clear that if Panchajanya got even the slightest hint that I had come to his kingdom to free Punardutta, he would certainly not let me go back alive from Vaivasvatpur. Tamas and Chandak would prove to be of no use and I would meet my end. All in all, the sooner we accomplished our mission, the better it would be for us. So, I now began loitering around trying to come up with a plan. It was noteworthy that it was Panchajanya alone whose reign was supreme here and nobody else in the kingdom had any say whatsoever. There were just two classes of people in the kingdom, soldiers and servants. The soldiers helped in ruling the kingdom while the servants served their masters. In fact, there was nothing like a marketplace in Vaivasvatpur. Even the population did not seem to number over four to five thousand. All in all, this could not be called a kingdom. They were just pirates who terrorised the neighbouring kingdoms and plundered them. And they made their living with that stolen wealth. Nothing was produced here, and there was no business of any kind. Meaning, everything was functioning solely on the basis of the army's might. In any case, at present, it did not seem easy for me to either find Punardutta or to escape from here on my own. In short, I could accomplish my task only with the assistance of Tamas and Chandak. So, as soon as I found the opportunity, I cornered Chandak and casually tried to glean information about Punardutta. On hearing me enquire about him, Chandak was surprised. This was certainly a good sign for me. He knew at least something about Punardatta. Chandak had anyway become my confidante now, and besides, why hide things from friends? So, without hesitation, I explained to him in detail everything about our education at *Acharya Sandipani's ashram* and about our offering him *gurudakshina*. For, in my opinion, if you want anyone, especially friends, to help you accomplish your task to the best of their ability, there is no scope for hiding anything. They should always know the real reason behind the task entrusted to them, otherwise, most of their energy would get wasted in being curious about it. In short, concealing facts or prevaricating is a strategy to be used with enemies, not with friends.

Chandak really liked my open-hearted conversation. He too told me everything that he knew without any reservations. Even better was the fact that whatever details he divulged about Punardutta were all very encouraging. Most importantly, Punardutta was not only alive, Panchajanya had handed him over to Chandak after kidnapping him from the *ashram*! And even more importantly, Chandak was more than willing to help me rescue Punardutta from the soldier

who guarded him. I was thrilled to hear this. Suddenly, the goal which seemed almost impossible now appeared to be within reach. However, there were still some difficulties to be overcome. The biggest problem was to smuggle Punardutta from the cordon of the soldiers, who were all over the kingdom. Chandak and I discussed in great detail how we could rescue Punardutta. However, we could not formulate a definite plan of action. It seemed impossible to take Punardutta out of this fortress city without Panchajanya's knowledge. It was not that Chandak was not co-operating; the poor man was trying his best to help me. But the problem was that we could not really enlist anyone else's help in this mission. For, that would in fact, put my own life in danger. Meaning, all in all, even with Chandak's assurance of help, the idea of rescuing Punardutta single-handedly and taking him out of the kingdom through such tight security was unthinkable! The kingdom was so well-guarded that even a bird could not fly out from it. Then how would it be possible for three people in a boat to escape?

But as they say, the solution is born along with the problem! The difficulty is, we panic and get so caught up in the problems, that we do not see the solution. I believed that just as there is at least one relatively easier path to climb the toughest of mountains, just as some way can be discovered to cross even the densest of forests, a solution to every problem can also be certainly found. Although this was a complicated problem, a viable solution did present itself even after constantly pondering over it. I could clearly see that nothing could be done until Panchajanya was alive. Considering the kind of power he wielded, it was not possible for even a leaf to flutter here until he was killed. So, all in all, killing him was emerging as the only solution to this problem. But now the problem was that I could not kill him all by myself. Including Chandak, I needed the help of several soldiers. But why would they kill their own king? Why would they put their lives on the line in such an attempt? At least, they would not do this just to rescue Punardutta. Well, so what? I could make my task appear as if it was their mission, by weaving a web of ambition around it. If I could get Chandak to aspire to become the King, then he would definitely mobilise his trusted soldiers.

However, this was merely a one-sided plan, cooked up only in my mind. In reality, killing Panchajanya was no easy task. The plan could backfire very easily. Still, there was a possibility of this plan to work out, especially if Chandak and Tamas were convinced to lend their assistance in accomplishing it. Meaning, the problem seemed to be on the verge of getting solved to some extent. Earlier, the problem was how Punardutta could be rescued. The solution to that appeared to be Panchajanya's death. Then, the next problem that surfaced

was how was Panchajanya to be killed? The answer to that was clear; by convincing Chandak and Tamas to do it. And how could they be convinced to kill their own king? As I mentioned earlier, by fuelling their ambition, and I was prepared to do that. Chandak had anyway become my well-wisher and was already offering all the help he possibly could. In fact, for the sake of our safety, he had even made arrangements for us to escape unscathed from here, when we were unable to come up with any solution. But since I could not leave without Punardutta, I resolutely stayed put in Vaivasvatpur. Chandak had even promised me, that if we could not rescue Punardutta at this time, then he would try to get him out later when an opportunity presented itself, and would personally take him to *Acharya Sandipani's ashram*. Punardutta, for now, was alive, so considering the delicate situation we were in, it was better to be content with this. But who knew what the future held? Besides, how could Krishna return empty-handed? So, seeing no way out, even he was trying to find a solution along with me.

Now, having decided what needed to be done, there really was no point in wasting any more time. So, setting aside all past discussions, I immediately went to see Chandak. After some polite conversation, I immediately came to the point. I said, "I know that even you are quite upset about the fact that you are not being able to help me in rescuing Punardutta. Let us forget that for now. But honestly speaking, our relationship has reached such a stage, that I am unable to tolerate the manner in which Panchajanya insulted a wise and loyal person like you in front of the entire court. Does any King insult his own Chief Minister in such a brazen manner and award him the death sentence?" I had certainly touched an exceedingly raw nerve and hit him where it hurts the most. I could see from his expression and behaviour, the pain and anger it was causing him. Seeing my plan working, I then deliberately began to lure him further into the trap. This time, setting aside all sympathy, I said in the manner of a seer, "Actually, only a wise and brave warrior like you ought to be the King of this kingdom. A King who insults his Chief Minister in front of the whole assembly is certainly not fit to be a King. Before insulting you, Panchajanya should at least have considered the fact that the army is always under the control of the General. Besides, you are also the very well-respected Chief Minister of Vaivasvatpur. The king should have thought at least a hundred times before insulting someone like you!"

Although I had to trap only one fish, the net which I had cast was so wide that all the fishes in the sea could get trapped in it. So what chance did poor Chandak have? Indeed, the political manoeuvring that I had learnt in Mathura and the experience of killing Kansa, both were proving very useful right now.

Chandak did not say anything, but from his changed expression, I could see that he liked what I had said. It was quite evident from the look on his face that in his heart of hearts, he had already begun to dream of becoming a King. He had really fallen for the bait. No further talk was necessary. With my expression, I too indicated to him that when Krishna was present, nothing was impossible. When he was communicating with his expressions, then could I be far behind? However, everything could not be discussed only through expressions. Besides, how reliable are mere expressions? They can always be twisted around. One could always say, “No, no. I never meant that. Would I speak against my own King?” But words once spoken could not be taken back. Thus, now it was essential to verbalise all that I had said so far by way of expressions. If words also reflected the same determination, then one could be sure of the intention. So, I spoke earnestly, “Why do you not become the King of Vaivasvatpur?”

Hearing this, he blurted out, “As long as Panchajanya is alive, this is not possible.”

‘There! This is precisely what I have come here to make you understand,’ I thought. In a flash, his heartfelt desire had escaped his lips. Now, with Krishna around, hiding one’s thoughts was impossible, even for the cleverest of the clever! However, as soon as Chandak had said it, he too realised that he had said something wrong. But what could be done now? The intention had been revealed. At any rate, the pride of becoming a King does make one lose one’s senses. Besides, did Chandak stand a chance when dealing with Kanhaiya, in front of whom even the gopis lost all sense of reason? However, the task was yet unfinished. It was not right to indulge in this self-praise at such an inappropriate time. Thus, seeing that the iron was hot, I thought it best to strike my final blow. What if he changed his mind after some time? So, this time, I asked very dramatically, “What if I kill him?”

Chandak nearly jumped out of his skin upon hearing this and asked, “Is this possible?”

I replied with quiet confidence, “Definitely, provided you help me.”

He then spoke very humbly, “I am anyway always with you. I have committed the rest of my life to you. Moreover, you are now making me a King. All you have to do is just command this slave of yours.”

With Chandak agreeing to the conspiracy, my success and Panchajanya’s death drew even closer. Once the goal was all set, then what was the point in waiting? We immediately got down to discussing in detail the tasks that lay ahead. First and foremost, I obtained complete information about all of Panchajanya’s friends and enemies from Chandak. But unfortunately, this information was of no use in formulating a plan. There was just one demon

named Punyajana who was Panchajanya's arch-enemy. He and Panchajanya had earlier been close friends. And, as is well known, an enmity between former friends runs much deeper than enmity between strangers. Still, in spite of this, Punyajana was of no use to us at present. For now, we did not need an enemy who was an outsider but one who was close to him. We merely wanted to free Punardutta, not win over the kingdom. Well, it did not matter if Panchajanya did not have enemies within the house. I could always create enemies for him. This was not a difficult task for me; I had already turned Chandak against him. I could well turn a few more. As such, Panchajanya could not be defeated by strength. Why just me, no King of Aryavarta had the wherewithal to defeat him.

He could only be brought down by political manoeuvring. And I was very quickly becoming an expert at that. However, there was one problem here as well, and that was, I could not do anything directly. I needed to make every move through Chandak alone. He was my only pawn as well as my solitary support. Meaning, the disparity between doing a task myself and getting it done by others still remained.

But how could Krishna's firm resolve ever be broken? If the task was difficult, I would accordingly apply more intelligence, and work harder with increased energy levels. Enthusiasm and confidence would also be augmented as required. In fact, they had already been increased! I immediately became absorbed in my task setting aside all obstacles. I started off by giving Chandak three tasks to perform. First, he had to win the confidence of the senior officers of the army. Next, he had to get Tamas to assist him. And then, he had to somehow convince Panchajanya to step out of the cage, even if it was for just a short while. There was no question of Tamas ignoring my request. Moreover, he was also being promised the post of Chief Minister in the new regime. And it happened exactly as I predicted. As soon as Chandak revealed to him that I was behind all this, Tamas agreed without a second thought. And with him on our side, I had gained control over the army as well as the navy of the kingdom. As for Panchajanya being induced to step out of cage, this good news too was brought by Chandak soon after. He scheduled a grand festival in Vaivasvatpur for the next new moon night. Dance programmes and wrestling matches had also been arranged as part of this festival. Panchajanya was to be invited to this festival; and the good news was that in the midst of this welcoming ceremony, they had come to an arrangement for him to step out of the cage. Meaning, Chandak's plan seemed not only exciting, but effective as well. Not only this, Chandak had even organised a regiment of soldiers loyal to him. In short, Chandak had done his work diligently, and the strategy I had to follow too had completely taken shape in my mind. Honestly, victory now suddenly appeared to

be welcoming me with open arms. All we had to do was to wait for the new moon day. As for bhaiya, he was a happy soul. All these things did not matter to him. He was extended the best hospitality, and great care was taken to serve him drinks and food to his liking. Seeing me engaged in a lot of activities, he had realised that I was in the process of executing some plan. But so far, he had not asked me even once, what it was that I was exactly doing. Was living with such a happy soul like bhaiya, any less than experiencing supreme joy?

Finally, the fateful new moon night arrived. The festival was arranged in the open ground. Needless to say, the entire ground had been decorated in an enchanting manner. By the time we reached, the entire ground was lit up in the light of the torches. Chandak had made elaborate arrangements for this 'function' - the killing of Panchajanya! He was bidding farewell to his king with great pomp and splendour. Well, coming back to the festive area, it was huge and rectangular in shape. Right in front of me was a big podium; perhaps Panchajanya was to sit there. Below it, a big area was left open and it was obviously meant for dance performances and wrestling bouts. At the far end of the ground, seating arrangements had been made for the members of the council of ministers, the chief officials and important guests. As a mark of respect, we too were seated with them. After all, we were now King Panchajanya's honoured guests. Well, all this was a different part of the story, but right now, I was quite alarmed on seeing so many soldiers stationed all around. Had Chandak really made foolproof arrangements or was he just spinning a yarn? Anyway, we would know that by the time the festival ended. At present, the audience standing on both sides appeared quite enthusiastic. I was just watching and trying to comprehend everything when Tamas arrived to call us, and we set off. We were standing near the podium, and now, we sped across the festival ground and quickly reached the place where arrangements for our seating were made and took our seats. We ensconced ourselves comfortably, for I had nothing else to do. All I had to do was quietly be a spectator and observe the war between Chandak's diligence and Panchajanya's alertness. My turn to do something would come only if Chandak emerged victorious in the battle. Unaware of the conspiracy being hatched by us, poor bhaiya was waiting impatiently for the wrestling matches to begin. Had I not said that he was a happy soul? Bhaiya could never understand why one had to plan to kill somebody. He believed in just picking up his mace and directly engaging the opponent in combat. Thinking about the consequences and indulging in mental gymnastics was just not his forte.

Meanwhile, Chandak walked up to me and conveyed such good news that my confidence levels shot up. He whispered in my ear that according to the

plan, he was stationed right behind us with three hundred of his faithful, armed soldiers. What more did I need? This bolstered my confidence to no end. Until now, everything was certainly proceeding according to the plan and accordingly, our seats had been arranged right in front of Panchajanya's cage. Yes, I was certainly experiencing the nervousness which one normally feels before the execution of such an ambitious plan. Now, all we had to do was to wait for Panchajanya to arrive. To tell you the truth, now even the little time that we had to wait now seemed to stretch to eternity, for if the plan failed, it would mean certain death for us all. Indeed, the next few moments would decide whether we would live or die. And under such circumstances, we certainly needed to be in control of our faculties in order to execute such a dangerous plan. On one hand, we had to keep a sharp eye on everything, while on the other, we also had to experience the feeling that possibly these might be the final moments of our lives. Of course, I had experienced several such tense moments before. The truth was that no matter which task I undertook, it was my life that was always at stake. As a matter of fact, I had always been living on the edge. Well, the one who was born in the shadow of death and that too in a prison, could not expect anything more from life. If you observe closely, you will notice that it was this deep understanding on my part which helped me retain a unique kind of joy within me despite all the adverse circumstances. Take the present situation for instance. Such a momentous and decisive event was about to occur in a moment. It was going to be a test of my strategy along with that of Chandak's diligence. The first question was whether he would succeed in getting Panchajanya out of the cage. If he did come out, it was I who had to finish him off. Even if the killing went off smoothly, it was yet to be seen, whether the soldiers who Chandak had claimed were loyal to him, were really so. What if we were arrested for the crime of killing Panchajanya? But the speciality of my personality was that despite all these problems I was only alert, and not at all frightened.

No matter, for now, the moment of truth had finally arrived. The sound of Panchajanya's conch reverberated through the entire ground. Indeed, this heralded the arrival of Panchajanya. Everybody stood up to welcome the King. I was the first to rise from my seat. His faithful soldiers trotted up to the platform and placed his cage on it. I became fully alert and vigilant. Just then a troupe of young girls came forward with garlands to welcome him. I was ready, acutely aware that it was now or never. If I missed this chance, our game would be over. Then let alone Punardutta, even I would find it impossible to get out of here. Naturally, Tamas and Chandak were far more restless than I was, for we were all playing for high stakes. As soon as Panchajanya stepped out of the cage to

accept the garlands, I aimed my discus at his exposed neck. The discus soared above the arena, flew inches over the top of the flower girls' heads and struck Panchajanya's neck with precision. Within moments, his severed head fell off from his body. There was no question of my discus missing its target at such a precarious moment. My mission was accomplished!

There was pandemonium at the festival ground. People began to run helter-skelter in utter panic. Panchajanya's guards stood frozen in shock, not having the remotest idea of what had happened. I did not even have the time to taste the joy of my victory. It was imperative to get this situation under control immediately. I quickly signalled Chandak to kill all of Panchajanya's loyal bodyguards, and let no one escape. His soldiers were ready and they were upon them in a flash. Within moments, they slaughtered all the bodyguards. I heaved a huge sigh of relief. I was now assured that Chandak had not been spinning a yarn. However, there was no time to feel any great relief at the moment. I immediately bounded up to the stage with Chandak to the spot where Panchajanya's dead body lay. I was striding ahead, shielded by Chandak's soldiers in the midst of the tumult and pandemonium all around. My feet seemed to have acquired a life of their own and raced ahead. Bhaiya, Chandak and Tamas were also following me albeit a little slower. Indeed, there was only one way to control the mayhem all around, and that was to immediately proclaim a new King. But just see my childishness; the moment I noticed Panchajanya's conch lying by his side, I could not stop myself from picking up that wonderful shell. Now was this the time to be lured by a conch? You tell me, should I call this my childishness or immaturity? Or should I appreciate my ability to recognise beautiful things? No matter what I call it, my childish act did not stop here. As soon as I had the shell in my hands, I blew into it. What a sound it had produced! Let me tell you that because of its wonderful sound, the Panchajanya conch was famous across the entire Aryavarta! As far as I was concerned, I liked it so much that I kept this shell with me all my life. You would remember that much later, I had blown this very conch which signalled the beginning of the Mahabharata war.

Leaving that for later, let me return to the present. And the truth of the moment was that I had certainly not killed Panchajanya for his conch shell! This was just a temporary distraction. My actual mission was to free Punardutta and to accomplish that, it was necessary to immediately declare Chandak the new King. Upon hearing the familiar sound of the conch, the mayhem subsided to some extent. Everyone felt that perhaps Panchajanya was still alive. Perhaps, all this was just a game. Regardless, I instantly grabbed this opportunity and started making attempts to bring the situation under control. And as part of these

attempts, first, I immediately sent Chandak to address the crowd. He was supposed to climb up the stage and so he did, but amusingly enough, I too bounded up behind him to show off my political skills. I also told him clearly that he should declare himself King and also make tall promises of bringing peace and prosperity to his subjects. Presently, he was a Chief Minister; would it take long for him to understand the gist of what I was saying? As soon as he stepped forward, the pandemonium came to a complete stop. And why would it not? After all, he was the Chief Minister as well as the Commander-in-Chief of Vaivasvatpur. Naturally, his address at such a delicate moment held a lot of significance. But seeing the magnitude of the occasion, his self-confidence waned. But still, it was he who had to make that announcement. Some outsider, especially the one who had killed Panchajanya, could not be expected to make the announcement. Therefore, even though he did it nervously, Chandak addressed the people and declared himself the new King of Vaivasvatpur. Along with that, he explained in detail the reasons why it had become necessary to kill Panchajanya. As the people began agreeing with him, his confidence kept soaring. Then he promised that under his regime the people would not be terrorised and special attention would be given to improve the living standards of the common man. He also promised that there would be no discrimination between a servant and a soldier. Reassuring the assembled crowd with several such sweet promises, he brought his speech to a close.

Now it was confirmed, our Chandak had become the King. The situation here was similar to the one in Mathura. After Chandak's speech, there did not seem to be any great opposition from the people to the killing of Panchajanya. To tell you the truth, everyone, in fact, seemed to wholeheartedly welcome the idea of Chandak becoming the King. I had not at all expected everything to get resolved so easily. And as for Chandak, he just could not believe that Panchajanya had been killed, and that the people had accepted him as their new King! To him, all this seemed like a dream! Of course, he could not help thinking it was a dream, and neither could I convince him otherwise. After all, everything seemed to have happened in a fraction of a second. This is *Krishnaleela*—the magical, mystical drama created by Krishna, where even the most difficult of tasks were resolved with the greatest of ease. Well, now that I had achieved such a tremendous victory, did I not deserve to feel proud and feel as if I was in seventh heaven, for some time at least? I could have gone on to a higher level of bliss, but what could I do? The circumstances would not permit me to do so. For, neither was my task accomplished yet nor had the threat been completely averted. Not that I expected any new opposition now. Still, it was necessary to remain cautious and alert. So, I immediately signalled to Chandak

to bring Punardutta and jumped down from the podium. Then, I quickly grabbed bhaiya's hand and instantly proceeded to the ship with Tamas. You cannot even imagine how fast all these moves were taking place in succession. Surrounded by soldiers, bhaiya, Tamas and I were hurrying towards the shore. The noise of the crowd had subsided, but the people were still taking time to digest what had happened. Now Chandak had to take care of all that, I just had to reach the shore for my mission to be successful. We crossed the entrance to Vaivasvatpur without any hurdle. Seeing the ship standing on the shore, I felt fresh life pervading my being. And when the soldiers saluted me on boarding the ship, I was sure that I had escaped unscathed. However, as a precautionary measure, I still did not send Tamas off. On the other hand, my heart was pounding faster and faster in anticipation, waiting for Chandak to arrive. To tell you the truth, I had killed Panchajanya, but I was still feeling jittery. After all, killing such a powerful King of the pirates was no joke. Now whether it was a joke or a harsh reality, the deed had been done. My heart was also thumping in the apprehension of the possible consequences of my act. Chandak's arrival would bring back my confidence. And the good thing was, this wait proved to be shorter than expected. Very soon, Chandak came back with Punardutta, with scores of soldiers guarding him. Surprisingly, he had brought with him lots of gifts like diamonds and other precious stones, and fifty dancing girls. I accepted the jewels but sent back the girls. Dancing girls suited a kingdom, and we had no kingdom. Forget about a kingdom, we did not even have a place that we could call our home! Forget about home too, we did not have even a single safe refuge on this vast earth. For, as soon as we left, the devil named Jarasandha would begin hounding us again!

Nonetheless, what was the point in worrying about Jarasandha now? At this moment, I wanted to celebrate the fact that we had been able to save Punardutta and that we would be able to pay our *gurudakshina* to our great guru. I could lament about Jarasandha after I had paid my *gurudakshina*. This was all about me. As for bhaiya, he had turned into a statue. Neither had he understood anything earlier, nor was he able to comprehend anything now. In fact, he still could not believe that Punardutta had been rescued and Panchajanya had been killed. But of course, bhaiya was not at fault. I had worked my magic very swiftly, and besides, the events too had occurred at a very rapid pace! Anyway, Punardutta had got onto the ship but still, it was essential to maintain the pace of our activities. Our mission was still not over. Until we managed to take Punardutta outside the boundaries of Vaivasvatpur, leave alone Punardutta, even we could not consider ourselves to be safe. With this in mind, I hastily took leave of Tamas and Chandak. Both bid us a very emotional farewell. Along with

that, they also sent ten of their loyal soldiers with us. And like a truly conscientious person, I extracted a strong assurance from King Chandak that he would not commit any atrocities on his own people, and that he would not unnecessarily raid the coastal settlements. And having won a splendid victory, our ship set sail for Prabhasa. Strangely, I had been in such a hurry, that even though the ship had left the shore, I had not glanced at Punardutta even once!

Chapter 6

Deserting The Battlefield

It was only now that I felt that I had returned to reality. However, despite that, I still could not quite believe that Punardutta, my *gurudakshina*, was right before my eyes. But the reality was that he was standing right there, in front of me, in the open part of the ship. And you will not believe, that it was only now that I looked at him properly. To tell you the truth, I could not stop looking at him. I cannot tell you how emotional I had become. We were still standing at the front end of the ship. Punardutta was gazing in absolute wonderment at the sea and the ship in turns. He did not recognise us at all. He was absolutely clueless about why he had been brought here on being removed from the dungeon. And I was looking at the fleeting expressions on his face with compassion. I felt as if, *Acharya* Sandipani seemed to have appeared before my eyes. No matter how long I kept looking at Punardutta, it was not enough and I just kept on gazing at him lovingly. Seeing him standing there, I had to appreciate Chandak for one thing; he had taken good care of his charge. Meanwhile, bhaiya was still looking at him in a peculiar manner, but a little later he stopped. There was a long journey ahead of us. I took Punardutta by the hand and led him to the cabin with bhaiya following me. The mere clasping of our hands was enough for Punardutta to feel the warmth of our friendship. We reached the cabin, and he took his place opposite me. Surprisingly, Punardutta was totally unaware of his past. Perhaps, Chandak had not thought it wise to reveal anything about it to him in order to avoid upsetting him. No matter, I gradually told him in detail about his father Sandipani and *Acharya*-mother. Naturally, on hearing all this, tears welled up in his eyes, so much so that he fell at my feet. Fortunately, he soon calmed down, and in no time, we became good friends. But yes, he was deeply pained by the

fact that despite being the son of such a great teacher, he was brought up by a demoniac king and had remained uneducated. Another thing that distressed him was that he knew nothing about the outside world. Not only were ships and sea new to him, the poor fellow was consciously experiencing the outside world for the very first time. Anyway, this was a tremendous victory in politics in my life. I had come to like politics. There was no war between two armies, neither was there any unnecessary violence, nor any pointless devastation. There was some manoeuvring, a plot was hatched, the king was killed, meaning, the very root of the problem was destroyed, and that was the end of the matter!

Anyway, at this time, the atmosphere in the cabin was one of bonhomie. And in such an atmosphere, does it take long for time to pass? On the morning of the third day, we reached Prabhasa. We quickly alighted from the ship with the treasure and Punardutta, and dashed towards Jaivik's house. He could not believe that we had done away with the powerful King Panchajanya and freed Punardutta. He was so happy that very soon he spread this news across Prabhasa. As the news of Panchajanya's death spread like wildfire, the entire population of Prabhasa gathered to see us. Of course, this was the respect accorded to the 'killer of Panchajanya' and not exactly to me. Even so, ultimately it was I, who was being honoured. And who does not like being honoured? But this was not the time to get ensnared by such things. For, firstly, the danger had still not been averted completely, and secondly, Jaivik's foolish act of spreading the news had only escalated the danger. So, without resting even for a moment, we set off for the marketplace in the chariot. We already had the vast treasure which Chandak had gifted, so all of us bought lots of clothes and jewellery along with things necessary for the journey. And needless to say, while buying clothes and accessories, Punardutta's needs were attended to with utmost care. After all, he was our prince now, our *gurudakshina*, who had now also become a close friend of ours. Now you can guess how happy a person who had to dress up like a demon all his life, would have felt on being dressed in new clothes and accessories. In fact, refined attire suited him very well. Honestly, at this time he looked no less than any prince to me. Well, I had the whole journey and the rest of my life to gaze at him. As soon as we had finished buying everything we needed, we put our luggage onto the chariot, and without getting into any more trouble, we left forthwith for Ujjaini. Frankly speaking, I wanted to depart from Prabhasa as soon as possible. For, killing Panchajanya was a major event in itself. Any one of his loyal supporters or well-wishers could launch a counter-attack on us to avenge his killing. Not that I was fearful; it was just that I believed in always being cautious. I would have certainly not hesitated in giving up my valuable life in battle, but to lose it due to utter carelessness was

unacceptable to me. Even otherwise, it was best to move on quickly after one had successfully completed one's mission.

Well, we crossed Prabhasa in a flash. I had made Punardutta sit in the front with me. Naturally, the treasure had been entrusted in the strong hands of bhaiya. Needless to add, the journey on a chariot and in the company of friends was making Punardutta go delirious with joy. In fact, he seemed to be a little proud of his new clothes too. This was a good sign, and it meant that he was quickly becoming himself. Punardutta's presence had made the journey even more enjoyable for us. Now we were buying something or the other at every marketplace along the way. Punardutta was feeling blessed on eating so many different kinds of delicacies and dishes. And what do I say about bhaiya and myself? Truly, a little bit of wealth and the company of good friends can make life extremely enjoyable! And at this moment, I was experiencing this truth to the fullest. We were eating and drinking to our heart's content, shopping all kinds of goods and having a joyous ride. This was the first time that we had earned money and were enjoying it to the hilt. Indeed, it would be foolish of us to try to imagine a journey more pleasurable than this one, and hence I gave my imagination a rest.

Now, let me tell you that after about twelve days of travelling, we reached Ujjaini. My enthusiasm and Punardutta's curiosity were at their peak. As soon as we entered the *ashram*, Punardutta could not contain his emotions. Seeing us coming, *Acharya*, *Acharya*-mother and all our friends came running. Everyone had gathered right at the entrance. We too stopped the chariot there and jumped down. I took the blessings of *Acharya* and *Acharya*-mother but surprisingly, nobody noticed Punardutta except for *Acharya*-mother. On the other hand, Punardutta was not able to hide the elation in his eyes on seeing his parents. As a result, tears welled up in the eyes of the emotional boy. Understanding the significance of the moment, I too quickly made Punardutta stand in front of *Acharya* and very humbly said, "Please accept my *gurudakshina*!"

Hearing this, *Acharya* looked amazed. Tears started streaming from mother's eyes. Punardutta too felt blessed on being embraced by his mother and receiving his father's blessings. As for our friends, they could not even believe that the two of us, all by ourselves, had rescued Punardutta from an extremely powerful demon like Panchajanya, and that too in just four months. For that matter, even *Acharya* and *Acharya*-mother could not quite believe it. Not just them, even I had to pinch myself repeatedly to make sure that it was not merely a fitful flight of fantasy.

Exhausted from the long journey, we first took a bath. By that time,

Acharya-mother, helped by a servant, had prepared the meal and had also cooked some *kheer*.²³ Mother, of course, had made this *kheer* to celebrate the return of her darling son. After our meals, all of us gathered in the open ground and in no time, this meeting was transformed into a festival. Sudama and I once again enraptured the entire *ashram* with our singing and flute-playing. This time around, the sweet melody of my flute also seemed to reflect the satisfaction I felt on having paid off my *gurudakshina*. The atmosphere was so charged that even *Acharya* could not stop himself from belting out some hymns. Furthermore, mother too sang some hymns today. This showed just how happy both, *Acharya* and *Acharya*-mother were. And as for Punardutta, he was, of course, the chief guest of the celebration as well as its main audience. He was very happily enjoying everything. Everything was a novelty for the poor fellow. As for *Acharya*-mother, she seemed as if she had gained a new lease of life. She was so elated she seemed to be on cloud nine. Throughout the festival, she made Punardutta sit close beside her, and her tears simply refused to stop flowing. Truly, the pleasure that I had received from defeating Panchajanya or from having received the much-needed wealth, paled in comparison to the bliss that I experienced on seeing *Acharya*-mother's elation. There is no greater joy on this earth than seeing the happiness that emanates from the depths of the soul on the face of another person. And especially, if it is borne out of your actions, then it is all the more pleasurable.

I was thinking about this, when my contemplation suddenly turned in another direction. I began to think, is it not the duty of every human being to remain happy under all circumstances? Could *Acharya*-mother not derive the same joy that she experienced on getting Punardutta back, from her incoming and outgoing breath? I mean, is breathing any less important? This game called life lasts only as long as the breath is inhaled and exhaled. I made it a point to stay as happy as possible. All through my life, I immersed myself fully in every emotion, every situation. For, if a situation has presented itself, it means it has already fallen to our lot. Whatever is happening should be considered as having already happened, whether it is Jarasandha who is before you or the serpent, Kaaliya. If it has already fallen to our lot, why grieve over it? Why not welcome it just as if it were Radha? Why not make the ensuing struggle a celebration of sorts? Whether it was the serpent Kaaliya or Keshi, the demon, this was precisely how I had welcomed trials and tribulations all my life. And just see the result; despite having grown up, living in the shadow of death all the time, I had been enjoying my life so much. Oh! I had got engaged in this ego-bolstering contemplation, and meanwhile, the evening's festival had come to an end.

It did not matter, for now, every day at the *ashram* was a festival. There was happiness all around. But even in this atmosphere of happiness, *Acharya's* expressions somehow made me feel as if he was deeply worried about something. I just could not fathom what the matter was. His being so grave in such a joyful atmosphere was not something which could be comprehended. Still, seeing him in such a sombre mood, time and again, I found my mind reluctantly wondering about his grave demeanour. But try as I might, I found myself incapable of comprehending the reason behind it. However, I had full faith in his expressions. If he was grave, then there was definitely something to worry about. Actually, the problem was my naivety. This clearly meant that even though I considered myself very astute, there was still much that I had to learn from life. A person must continue learning as long as he is alive. Knowledge of the self may be obtained in a second, but as far as the knowledge of this world is concerned, even if a person continues gaining it till the end of his life, he will still have a lot left to learn about it. However, since I was unable to understand what the matter was, I decided to flow with the tide. For, the depth of *Acharya's* feelings seemed beyond my understanding at present.

Well, today was actually Punardutta's first day at the *ashram*. All the existent rules had been set aside to celebrate the occasion. We were being served delicacies during both mealtimes as well. In the evening, there was another celebration. Once again, my flute and Sudama's singing mesmerised everyone. Meaning, the events were proceeding well, but *Acharya* was not enjoying any of these things. And therefore, whether I wished it or not, my attention would invariably get drawn to him. Well, that was bound to happen, but what was special about today, was that I ended the day's festival by blowing on the Panchajanya conch. The conch enthralled everyone to such an extent, that just like my flute, I felt compelled to blow on it time and again. This was not all; just like my discus and flute, the conch too became a part of my existence.

However, it was after this evening's festival that trouble began to brew. As the festival came to an end, everyone was exhausted and they retired for the night. I too was exhausted, and was feeling sleepy; after all, I had reached here after riding the chariot for twelve whole days! But what can I say, *Acharya's* solemn demeanour had ensured that I did not sleep! In spite of being so fatigued, my consciousness was trying to fathom the secret behind *Acharya's* sombre mood. The trouble was, even though I was trying my level best, my mind was still unable to fathom the reason behind *Acharya's* sombre demeanour. And how could anyone understand it? Not only had Punardutta been rescued from the clutches of Panchajanya, but I too had returned safely. Indeed, there was not even a single scratch on my body; then why was he so upset? Thus, I had to

reluctantly spend the entire night lost in this contemplation.

Finally, after lunch the next day, the secret behind *Acharya's* grave demeanour was revealed. And I didn't learn about it because of my smartness, but because of *Acharya's* grace, and that too, when he took me to his chamber after lunch and said gravely, "Jarasandha's messengers had come to the *ashram* a couple of times. He is searching for you everywhere like an insane man. I do not know why, but this time, he seems to be very anxious to find and eliminate you. Not only that, he has also issued a warning to all his allies, that if any one of them shelters Krishna and Balarama, that person would be considered Jarasandha's arch-enemy. I see your life completely besieged by great troubles."

So, this is what it was all about. It was not *Acharya* who was worrying unnecessarily, but it was I who was being carefree in my foolishness. Well, that carefree attitude had instantly vanished into thin air on hearing *Acharya's* grave words. For certain, I needed to contemplate deeply to decide what the next step should be. The threat of Jarasandha had been following me for a long time, but the fact that such a great king had nothing else to do than eliminate me, was a cause for immense worry. There was also another reason to worry, which was that none of the Kings of Aryavarta would grant us asylum now. Naturally, because at this time, there was no king in Aryavarta who was brave enough to defy Jarasandha. And as for Mathura, it was already planning to have us banished out of fear of Jarasandha. Meaning, once again, we were left without any refuge. Neither did we have a home, nor did we have a place to call our own. Within no time, we poor brothers were without any safe haven or support.

It was a peculiar situation; *Acharya*, who was sitting opposite me, was busy trying to gauge my expressions, and I was lost in deep thought. But then, *Acharya* said something which once again kindled a ray of hope in me. In the midst of our conversation, *Acharya* said that after we had left for Vaivasvatpur, grandfather had sent a messenger inviting us back to Mathura. This was good news indeed. It meant that the situation in Mathura had again become stable. It had at least improved enough for grandfather to consider inviting us. I had just begun contemplating on these lines when *Acharya* advised me against returning to Mathura. According to him, we would not remain safe there for long.

Before I could ponder on what he had said or analyse the situation properly, *Acharya* made a unique proposal. He said, "In my opinion, it would be better for you if you stay here for some more days. Believe me, there is no safer place than this for you in all of Aryavarta. I say this because Jarasandha's ambition to become the emperor of Aryavarta would not allow him to ever attack an *ashram*, and that too my *ashram*."

Hearing *Acharya's* proposal, my thoughts took on a new turn altogether. I

thought, 'I can always go back to Chandak if I want to. He had very emotionally asked me to come back. Jarasandha could never reach there in this lifetime.' On giving it some more thought, I realised that we were not completely without shelter. It was amazing; until just a few moments ago, we seemed to have no refuge, and now, there suddenly appeared to be several havens for us! In fact, we could now choose the haven we wanted to grace with our presence! However, despite this, arriving at a decision was not as easy as it appeared. But yes, we had to definitely take a decision in a day or two. I had understood both, what *Acharya* had said and what he was worrying about. To tell you the truth, his offer to have us stay back at the *ashram* had made me very emotional. But for now, I requested him to give me some time to decide and took his leave.

I stepped out of his chamber, but on coming out, I instantly got immersed in deep thought. All day long, I paced about the *ashram* from one end to another. I carefully considered all the possible scenarios. But instead of things becoming clearer, the situation was turning out to be even more complicated. For, if safety was the primary concern, then there was no place as safe as the *ashram*. But our taking refuge here was not good for the *ashram*'s reputation as a dignified institution. Secondly, if we did so, it was certain that the *ashram* would become a permanent irritant for Jarasandha. Moreover, we had to take into consideration the fact that the *ashram* was supported by the royal palace of Ujjaini. Certainly, King Jaisen would never want us to take shelter in an *ashram* in his kingdom. For, Jarasandha could not be trusted; what if he vented out his anger over the *ashram* on Jaisen? Another point to consider was that we could not live at the *ashram* forever. Life was a flowing stream and staying at the *ashram* would bring it to a standstill. Thus, after considerable thought, I reached the conclusion that instead of obstructing the flow of life and stopping at one place in the path of life, it was better to continue walking and let life flow freely. If *Acharya* Sandipani or the *ashram* got into trouble because of me, it would definitely not be right. And as far as Vaivasvatpur was concerned, we could most certainly take refuge at Chandak's place. Jarasandha could not even think of attacking Vaivasvatpur, at least not in this lifetime. But going there posed a problem too; after all, security was not the only objective in life. Living in a kingdom of demonic pirates was anyway akin to throwing one's own life into the abyss of complete ruin. It was better to live in the shadow of death rather than live forever in a kingdom of demonic pirates. So finally, the only place left was the endearing Mathura. In the present circumstances, returning to Mathura and confronting Jarasandha seemed to be the only appropriate thing to do. Considering the extent of Jarasandha's desperation for revenge, the matter could be resolved either with the death of either of us, or after we had reached a safe place where our lives

would be raised to new heights. And besides, if someone like Panchajanya could be killed, then why couldn't Jarasandha be confronted? There we would at least have Mathura's army and strength on our side. When I had killed a demon king like Panchajanya all by myself, then who was Jarasandha? And as my confidence soared, Mathura emerged as the best option. Even if it had not, it was always better to die in your motherland rather than hiding and running helter-skelter. Thus, after contemplating over all the alternatives, I finally decided to go to Mathura.

Later that night, during dinner, when I revealed my plan to *Acharya*, he was of course unhappy. He still believed that we would be safe only at the *ashram*. Really, our teacher-student relationship was based on such selflessness! He was worrying himself sick, thinking about me, and I was caught up in thinking about him. For that matter, if there is even the slightest tinge of selfishness in a relationship, then does it remain a relationship anymore? We were still discussing this issue, when Anuvinda arrived. Perhaps he had heard some part of our discussion. Sympathising with me, he expressed his opinion, saying, "Why don't we go to my father? Perhaps he could suggest a solution." I could see that there was merit in his suggestion. Maharaja Jaisen, the King of Ujjaini, was the father of Vinda and Anuvinda. But how could I forget that he was completely under the influence of Jarasandha? Vinda and Anuvinda were still not well-versed with the politics of the land. Thus, their suggestion was merely the result of their immature love for their friends. Nevertheless, what was the harm in giving it a try? There could be no harm in asking, when there were no expectations. As such, it is expectations that lie at the root of all losses. It was then that a thought crossed my mind, which made it necessary for us to go to King Jaisen. I began to think, 'If King Jaisen is under the influence of Jarasandha, it is possible that he may be displeased with our increasing proximity to *Acharya*.' If this were indeed the case, it would result in a strained relationship between the *ashram* and the royal palace, which I certainly did not want. Thus, it was necessary to go to the palace and meet the King, at least to ensure that this relationship was never strained.

When we had already made our decision, what was the point in wasting time? So, we immediately set off with Vinda and Anuvinda to meet King Jaisen. The palace was really quite magnificent. But at this time, how could we enjoy taking in the beauty of the palace? We had come here solely to seek refuge. Seeing that we were very impatient, Vinda and Anuvinda set aside all the formalities of hospitality and took us directly to the King's chamber. This was one of the main benefits of having been educated at a good *ashram*. The bigger the *ashram*, the greater the princes you manage to befriend. Otherwise, who

would have let the poor cowherd boys of Vrindavan enter the palace of Maharaja Jaisen? Anyway, as soon as Vinda and Anuvinda introduced us to their father, his face fell. The King's attractive features creased with anxiety. It became clear that he was not pleased with our visit to his palace. But I had seen the possibility of this eventuality and hence was prepared. But Vinda, unaware of all this, spontaneously asked his father to provide us asylum in his kingdom. The moment he heard this, a great many emotions in varying degrees registered on King Jaisen's face. After a few moments when his composure returned, he said in a serious tone, "You are a brave hero. You have killed two powerful kings, Kansa and now Panchajanya. You are a friend of my sons and the best student of the greatest *Acharya* in our kingdom. That being the case, it would be an honour for any king to provide asylum to a supremely gifted person like you. But please forgive me; the fear of Jarasandha is depriving me of this honour. However, if *Acharya* is willing, you can certainly continue staying at his *ashram*. The *ashram* is forever free from any kind of political pressure."

Saying this, he let out a sigh. Hearing their father's words, Vinda and Anuvinda were deeply disappointed. They had never even imagined that their father would not grant such a small request of theirs. Well, practical knowledge could not be gained at an *ashram*! Such knowledge is only attained by roughing it out through the harsh realities of life. As far as I was concerned, this was what I had expected. Besides, the suggestion of providing us with refuge in the palace was his son's idea. Therefore, it was not appropriate for me to react right now. So, I continued to stand in silence. Seeing me lost in deep thought, King Jaisen broke the silence, "However, even if you stay at the *ashram*, it can create difficulties for us. If nothing else, we will certainly have to face Jarasandha's ire because of it. You are wise enough, so you can decide what you would like to do."

I was impressed by the eloquence and the refined manner in which King Jaisen had voiced his concerns. Even unpleasant facts had been communicated in such a classy style. And since he had spoken directly to me this time, I had to give an appropriate reply. It was necessary that I too maintained the high standard of the conversation. So, I also spoke very calmly, "You are right. Actually, neither do we desire refuge in your kingdom, nor do we want to put you or the *ashram* into trouble by continuing to stay there."

On hearing this, King Jaisen breathed a huge sigh of relief, and for the first time, his serious face lit up with a smile. I too did not miss the opportunity to take advantage of this smile. As it was I who had brought the smile to his lips, I decided to call in the favour. So, I continued, "But I do have a small request. At present, we do not have any means of transport to go to Mathura. If you can

kindly provide us with two chariots and charioteers, then we shall be very grateful.”

The moment he heard this, he said, “Why two, I will gift you four chariots and horses. Kindly wait for two or three days. My new chariots are just going to be delivered!”

Honestly, I thought it was my right to demand the chariots. After all, we were doing him a favour by leaving his kingdom. Besides, I was no longer an ordinary cowherd boy. After killing Kansa and Panchajanya, I was rapidly emerging as one of the valorous heroes of Aryavarta. Thus, by giving him an opportunity to do me a good turn, I was only doing him a favour. For, if I got the chance to accomplish a few more feats of valour, then my standing in Aryavarta would be beyond compare. Why would anyone want to lose the opportunity of increasing his proximity to me by refusing to provide me with just two chariots? After staying in Mathura for so long, I knew enough about politics to understand at least this much. Also, let me bring you in on a secret. I had specifically come here only to arrange the chariots. And on seeing the opportunity present itself, I grabbed it with both hands. We needed chariots to safely carry the treasure which Chandak had given us, to Mathura. *Acharya* had only one chariot; if we took that along, what would he do? And to tell you the truth, another reason why I wanted to go to Mathura was to keep Chandak’s treasure at home. So, the treasure which Chandak had gifted us had also played an important part in my decision to go to Mathura. Also, after the accolades which the King had showered on me, it had become even more necessary to ask for a chariot. I had to find out whether I had really become a valorous hero, or whether the King was praising me to the skies only to serve his selfish goals. What if this thought of having become a hero was a misconception on my part? For, after killing Panchajanya and receiving the treasure, I had become quite proud of being a valorous hero. But now that King Jaisen had agreed to gift me chariots, I was sure that I had indeed become an eminent person in Aryavarta. And the indisputable proof of this was that on the fifth day, four brand new chariots were parked outside the main gate of the *ashram*. As soon as the chariots arrived, bhaiya and I began preparations to leave for Mathura. Frankly speaking, we had become a little puffed up with pride on seeing four new chariots. Well, we planned to depart the very next day. Everybody was really sad to see us preparing to leave. Punardutta was in tears on hearing that we would have to part ways. In contrast, *Acharya* looked more worried than sad. No doubt, we were the cause of his worry. Was our decision to go to Mathura a wrong one? Regardless, all of us sat together till late in the night, even though everyone was in a gloomy mood.

Soon this new day dawned in our life. It was now time to bid farewell to the *ashram*. Early in the morning itself, mother had arranged for some fruits for the journey to be kept in the chariots. Perhaps everyone had woken up early today. I do not know how many times we had embraced and bid farewell to our friends. Poor Punardutta was still requesting us to stay back at the *ashram*. I could understand his emotions at this point, but we had to leave. You will not believe, this ‘farewell ceremony’ continued for quite some time even at the entrance of the *ashram*. We finally embraced Punardutta and our friends for the last time, and taking the blessings of *Acharya*-mother and *Acharya*, we boarded the chariot. Tears welled up in everybody’s eyes. The condition of *Acharya*-mother and Punardutta was the worst. Somehow, bhaiya and I got into the same chariot and I handed over the reins to the charioteer. At present, for some reason, I did not feel like riding the chariot. Not only did I not ride the chariot, I went on to seat myself majestically in the chariot as if I was a great King. Well, if I was not one now, I would soon become a king; the process had already begun. At least, the current journey was similar to that of wealthy travellers. The chariot that followed us was loaded with the treasures and precious stones that Chandak had gifted us. Moreover, there was another chariot following the chariot filled with jewels and one chariot in front of mine. So, it was natural for this cowerd boy to sit a little smugly. The chariots were ours, and so was the wealth in them. And when I was sitting so majestically, you can well imagine how bhaiya, who was an expert at being pompous, must have been sitting. We certainly were no longer ordinary cowerd boys. Now that we had progressed so much, was there any harm in dreaming big? Unbelievably, I soon drifted off into a reverie in which I saw myself as a prince. We had not even crossed Ujjaini yet, and I was already engaging in flights of fancy.

However, my journey was not spent in daydreaming alone. Let me tell you that I repeatedly kept thinking of the emotional farewell accorded to us by *Acharya*, *Acharya*-mother, Punardutta and all our friends. The look of gratitude in *Acharya*-mother and Punardutta’s eyes was something that I could not forget. I had seen the very same look of gratitude in Chandak and Tamas’ eyes as well, when we had parted from them. I began to think, ‘How nice it feels to see gratitude in people’s eyes at the time of parting! But unfortunately, only someone who has helped another person without any selfish motive can experience this feeling.’ This aside, let me draw your attention to another intriguing fact. The chariot and charioteers gifted to us by King Jaisen were both bearing testimony to the terror that Jarasandha had unleashed all around. Neither did the chariots bear the royal insignia of Ujjaini, nor were the charioteers dressed in royal uniforms. This meant that Jaisen had certainly helped us, but he had ensured that

Jarasandha remained in the dark about it. This was fine by me as there was nothing offensive about it. At this point in time, our influence was not greater than that of Jarasandha. There is a simple rule in this world: if you want respect, then you must increase your influence.

Well, I would certainly take care of that as well, that is if I managed to survive! At the moment, to lighten up my mood, I launched into a light-hearted banter with my mind and started cursing my Uncle, 'Were Jarasandha's daughters the only women you could find to marry? Had you married the daughters of some ordinary King, I swear on Mother Yashoda, I would have killed that King long ago. Oh, when will this dark, looming shadow of Kansa vanish from my life? He had been after me ever since I was born and continued right until his death! And now that he was dead, he had unleashed this terrible, bloodthirsty fiend, Jarasandha, who was baying for my blood! Wow, Uncle! You are truly a specimen!' Indeed, now that we had set off for Mathura, it was natural for me to think of Kansa and Jarasandha.

As our journey progressed, my mind drifted away from these worthless musings and began focussing on Mathura. For, it was extremely necessary for me to contemplate over the situation prevailing in Mathura. Speaking of Mathura, I found my mind returning to the same question time and again. Despite the fact that grandfather had invited us to come to Mathura, would the Yadava leaders respect his wishes? Even if they gave refuge to us on account of grandfather's insistence, how would they handle this menace called Jarasandha? For, on hearing that I was in Mathura, he would definitely attack the city. In short, as soon as we reached Mathura, a clash between Jarasandha and us was inevitable. Well, when a clash was certain, and death was staring us in our face, what was the point in unnecessarily entertaining these futile thoughts now, and ruining the pleasure of this journey? Also, this was the first time that we were travelling in royal comfort, with servants to take care of all our needs. So, I thought we should at least enjoy this journey to the fullest. Thus, forgetting about everything else, I became absorbed in enjoying our journey. I would crane my neck scores of times in a day to look at the magnificent caravan of our four chariots. The journey now as we travelled was pleasurable alright, but at night, either bhaiya or I had to stay awake. What else could we do? The treasure which we were carrying along with us had made the nightly vigil a must for at least one of us. Apart from this, our journey was incredible in every sense of the word. What did we not have on this journey? Bhaiya and I were alone; we had four splendid chariots with us, along with charioteers and servants too. For the first time, we were enjoying life like the princes. So, we didn't even realise when our journey came to an end!

After ten days of travel, our chariots rolled into Mathura. We were returning to Mathura after almost a year. Naturally, I was beside myself with joy on seeing Mathura. After all, there is no place like home. The first thing we needed to do was to keep our treasure in a secure place. Therefore, we headed towards Father Vasudeva's mansion. If the circumstances had been any different, we would definitely have gone directly to the palace. The people of Mathura appeared quite excited to see us back. Sadly, however, their curiosity about our four chariots was far greater than their excitement on our return. Now, irrespective of whether the people were curious about us or our caravan, either way, the news was sure to spread. So, by the time we reached father's mansion, the news of our arrival had spread like wildfire all over Mathura. The moment they saw us, our parents were elated. The pride on seeing their children returning after completing their education was clearly visible in their eyes. But all my attention was centered on the treasure. First of all, I transferred all the treasure received from Chandak, safely into my room. For, it was for this very purpose that I had come to father's house before going to the palace. You know very well that in Krishna's life, duty always came before emotion. But yes, once I had taken care of the treasure, I chatted with mother and father to my heart's content. For no sooner had I arrived in Mathura than my brain became politically active once again. As a result, I first instructed bhaiya not to disclose any information about Panchajanya to anyone. In my opinion, for the time being, the killing of Panchajanya which had powerful leverage, could be effectively used to impress the Yadava leaders when the need arose. And a well-known fact about using leverage is that it is essential for it to be deployed at the right moment, else it often fails to bring about the desired result.

Nevertheless, no sooner had I ensured the security of the treasure than I set off for the palace, leaving bhaiya at our parents' house. For a long time, I had been eagerly looking forward to meeting my beloved grandfather, as I wanted to know about the current situation in Mathura as soon as possible. At first sight, the condition of the palace seemed to have deteriorated after our departure, so much so, that the soldiers of Magadha, whom we had dismissed from Mathura earlier, were back at their positions; and this definitely could not be called a good sign. This implied that though Jarasandha had still not invaded Mathura, he certainly had a vice-like hold over the royal palace. Meaning, the prey himself had walked into the death trap. I had to be content with the mere fact that even though Jarasandha had tightened his hold over Mathura, it was my grandfather who was still the King of Mathura. All in all, I just had to be content with this reassurance for the time being. So, it was with this feeling of reassurance that I entered grandfather's chamber. The news of our arrival had obviously reached

him. Naturally, he was ecstatic on seeing me as he loved me dearly. However, his joy at my arrival could not conceal his depression and despair. The warning signal for me was his despondent behaviour. The proof of this was the fact that even in broad daylight he was continually drinking wine. No matter, but seeing grandfather's condition, I too braced myself for the impending report on the current situation.

For some time, both of us, highly distressed, kept staring at each other in complete silence. There was nothing that grandfather had to say to me, and I had understood what I had to do, after observing the scenario at the palace. The situation was so delicate, that it had become difficult for us to even utter a few reassuring words to each other. Even otherwise, just a sign is sufficient for an intelligent person to comprehend what is going on around him. I had realised one more thing that inviting us to return to Mathura had been grandfather's personal decision. The Yadava leaders were certainly not in favour of it. Thus, if I wanted to stay in Mathura, I had to suitably impress these Yadavas, otherwise the situation would slide back to where we had left it. They would once again pressurise grandfather to banish us from Mathura, and once again, we would be left without any refuge whatsoever. There are many battles in life in which it is important to attack first. And the battle between the Yadava elders and us seemed to be a similar one. Indeed, there seemed to be only one way out of this situation. Before the Yadava leaders raised their voices and demanded our banishment from Mathura yet again, I had to do something impressive enough to compel them to welcome us instead. The thought was good, so I acted on it immediately. Breaking my silence, I immediately asked grandfather to arrange a meeting of the Yadava leaders. Along with these leaders, the common people were also to be invited to this meeting. When the time had come to beard the lion in its den, why not do it in front of the common people? Even grandfather was incredible! Once he got my support, he would instantly become so enthusiastic, as if all troubles had vanished! Proof of that was the fact that as soon as I suggested a meeting with the Yadava leaders, he immediately agreed to it. I couldn't believe that he did not even ask me about the objective behind convening this meeting. Of course, there was no cause for alarm, as I had already analysed the situation carefully. Even the battle strategy had been worked out well enough. Now, our future depended entirely on its implementation. Well, I would do that when the time came, but as of now, the good news for me was that grandfather quickly fixed the date of the meeting and instructed the Chief Minister to make all the necessary preparations. The meeting was scheduled to be held in just a week's time and that too in the main grounds of Mathura. Fully aware of the significance of the matter, I too

immediately got engaged in preparing myself for the meeting. Thereafter, I took permission from grandfather and left. Naturally, I needed some solitude to think about every step that I would take.

Unaware of all these developments, bhaiya had begun enjoying himself as soon as we had arrived in Mathura. Generally, during the day, bhaiya and I would roam together, but at night, he would unfailingly go to the royal palace and I would return to father's house. The wine that was flowing freely at the royal palace had certainly played a big role in our separation. And as far as the meeting was concerned, my objective was absolutely clear. To have the maximum number of common people at the grounds for the meeting. The larger the number of common people who attended it, the greater would be my sway over the Yadava leaders. For, even though the Yadava leaders were completely against me, my preeminence among the common people was still intact. If we leave political matters aside, Mathura was still in quite a pitiable condition. Neither had the task of repairing the houses progressed, nor was there any proper arrangement for food or water. In short, the conditions in Mathura had deteriorated to a pitiable state. Well, coming back to the meeting, its sudden announcement by the royal palace after my arrival in Mathura had made the Yadava leaders extremely curious. This was good for me, because their curiosity ensured that they would all be present at the meeting. Some other factors were speedily emerging in my favour too. For one, the battle that we had won against Jarasandha was still fresh in the minds of the common Yadavas. This meant that I would not need to impress them by displaying another instance of my bravery. More importantly, the fact that I had been sent away from Mathura due to the threat of Jarasandha was known only to grandfather and the Yadava leaders. The common Yadavas of Mathura were completely clueless about this. What I mean to say is that the factors which were in my favour were known to all, and those that were against me, had remained hidden within closed doors. Anyway, lost in all these deliberations, and amidst lengthy discussions with grandfather, we did not even realise when the whole week passed by. The day of the meeting was finally at hand. I woke up early in the morning and immediately reached the palace. I had seen many nights which had been decisive for me; this was a decisive day. And since I had scheduled this meeting as part of a plan, the success of the meeting depended entirely on my preparations. And naturally, as I was fully aware of the significance of this meeting, I had not spared any efforts in contemplating over it and preparing for it. I had carefully considered every minute political detail, so much so, that grandfather and I had decided to reach the meeting venue at different times. For that matter, I had sent grandfather on his way well in advance. I was going to enter the meeting a little later, to

emphasise my importance, and now, it was time for me to head for the meeting. My caravan was ready; bhaiya and I sat regally in one of the chariots and had the three empty chariots follow us. You can say that we had transformed our trip to the meeting venue into a procession. We still kept coming across people heading towards the main ground. Meaning, we were reaching well in time. As bhaiya and I alighted from the chariot and entered the ground, the Yadava leaders were stupefied by our grandeur. This was precisely the purpose for which I had brought along all four of our chariots. Grandfather was sitting on the throne and all the Yadava leaders sat surrounding him. But unfortunately, the common people had not displayed much enthusiasm; only about five hundred people could be seen. But what could they do? Mathura's economy was all but destroyed. Most of the people had become destitute and were overwhelmed with their own problems. Why would they be inclined to become a part of useless politics? If that's the way they felt, so be it. As was expected, pandemonium broke out in the assembly hall the moment we arrived. Seeing us descend from our chariots, some began applauding and demonstrating their solidarity with us while others began shouting out their denouncements. This was the biggest proof of my unique personality—a person could either love me or hate me but nobody could ignore me. How could anybody disregard a personality like me? In short, upon my arrival, the crowd had split into two clear factions. On one hand, the Yadava leaders and their sycophants were bristling with righteous anger upon seeing me, and on the other, the common inhabitants of Mathura were responding to them by shouting slogans in my praise. And in my heart of hearts, I was quietly enjoying this tug of war between the two factions. This is how I felt, but poor grandfather, despite his age, had to expend a lot of energy in silencing the crowd. He, of course, had to do at least this much out of love for his grandson. After much effort, when people in the assembly finally calmed down, grandfather commenced the meeting and announced, "Krishna has something important to address to all of you. I invite him to come forward and speak." As soon as my name was announced, I, who was sitting behind everyone on the stage, jumped up and tearing through the group of Yadava leaders, went up and stood by my grandfather. Now the crowd sitting below was in front of my eyes. As soon as I smiled and welcomed them by waving my hand, the entire ground resonated with slogans in my praise. Seeing this, the faces of the Yadava leaders who were sitting on either side of me, fell significantly. Now, they began to openly oppose me. In fact, they were just not allowing me to speak. Seeing this, the fervour of the crowd increased. I stood watching this drama in grand style. Did you see, the mere announcement of my name had created such havoc! My personality itself was controversial; the very mention of my name could

even raise the dead to react! And this was a meeting of the Yadavas, no less!

Now, no matter how amused I was at this spectacle—which was actually a part of my plan—this incessant pandemonium and noise had begun to make grandfather feel a little nervous. Yet, he must be appreciated, for he did not shirk from doing what must be done. Once again, he made an effort to calm down the assembly. Indeed, the Yadava leaders were the ones who were most vehemently protesting against him. Actually, they wanted to speak first, and I did not want to give them that opportunity at any cost. I feared that they would stoke the common people's fear of Jarasandha and turn them against me. Then I would be done for, for all that I had to say would have fallen on deaf ears. So, I continued standing in my place, firm as a rock. Grandfather, of course, wanted to hold the meeting in accordance to my wishes granting me the right to speak first. Therefore, he too had refused to budge and had stood in my favour. Now, for how long could the old King be ignored? So, soon, everybody calmed down. And now, I wanted to put forward my views before another outburst from the Yadavas or lest the agenda of the meeting itself got sidelined. Thus, without wasting any time, I blew on the Panchajanya conch and began addressing the crowd. The conch and the sound that emanated from it were so impressive that an astonished silence fell over all present at the meeting. The conch had done its bit; now, it was my turn. And dressed in splendid attire and adorned with ornaments, I was all set to make an impression. For making a good impression at this meeting was fundamental to my plan. So, I began my address by waving the Panchajanya conch which was in my right hand. Speaking very haughtily, I began, "This is the famous Panchajanya conch, which we have obtained after we killed Panchajanya. When we heard that our guru, *Acharya* Sandipani's only son had been kidnapped in his childhood by Panchajanya, we decided that we would rescue his son and present him to our *Acharya* as *gurudakshina*. We knew that Panchajanya was far more powerful than Jarasandha, but we were obliged to pay our *gurudakshina*. We also had full faith in our own strength. When one's resolve is firm and it is backed by strength, then one is bound to get the desired results. You will not believe it, but not only did bhaiya and I defeat the entire army of Panchajanya on our own, but we also killed him. However, since we are deeply attached to Mathura, we did not accept the opportunity of becoming the King and ruling that kingdom."

Hearing this, the entire assembly broke into thunderous applause. The poor Yadava leaders were silenced. They could not even begin to comprehend what Krishna had done! Grandfather was so elated that a steady flow of tears streamed from his eyes. And how can I describe the enthusiasm of the crowd! Even the Commander and the Chief Minister were delighted. In view of the

imminent attack by Jarasandha, what Mathura needed right now was a hero, and I fitted the bill in every respect. So, within moments, the crowd accepted me as their hero. Seeing that my plan had worked, I too became enthusiastic and driven by that enthusiasm, I continued, “And instead of ascending the throne ourselves, we installed Chandak, the former Chief Minister, as the King of Vaivasvatpur, who is now loyal to us. Besides being loyal, he, in his happiness at being made the King, presented us with immense wealth too. I am happy to tell you, that now, we are wealthy Yadavas too. To tell you the truth, it was to share this good news with you that I had requested this meeting. Indeed, we were also anxious about Mathura’s welfare, for as you all know very well, Mathura is currently plagued by internal as well as external strife. On one hand, the economy is in a pathetic state, and on the other, the fear of an attack by Jarasandha still haunts us. As for Jarasandha, he is not a big problem; when we can defeat a powerful demon like Panchajanya, of what consequence is Jarasandha? I strongly believe that instead of fighting among ourselves, if all of us Yadavas come together, we can permanently rid ourselves of Jarasandha. Not only that, if all the Yadavas do unite, it is not very difficult to pull Mathura out of the present abysmal condition either. In my opinion, to accomplish all this, it is imperative that we now choose a Yadava Chief from amongst ourselves, who is not only capable of saving us from Jarasandha, but is also committed to improve the pathetic condition of Mathura!”

This was my trump card, which I had played very cleverly. For, I was the only one who fitted this role. It really did not matter whether I was the one or not, but this was what I was leading to in my address. And finally, I got the expected result! My name echoed from all quarters of the crowd. The Yadava leaders became stunned. Nobody was even uttering their name. This is what happens when you come to wrangle with Krishna...the artful charmer, Krishna!...And then, that was how I was elected the leader of the Yadavas. With this, the objective behind convening the meeting had also been achieved. The cowherd boy who had arrived in Mathura from a small village called Vrindavan just a few years ago, had now become the leader of the Yadavas. As soon as the people made their decision clear, the Yadava elite beat a hasty retreat. No matter, for, at the moment, grandfather was going wild with joy. And as for the common people, they had lifted me on their shoulders, and beating their drums and cymbals, they had already wound their way around the ground a couple of times. Seeing this, tears welled up in my emotional bhaiya’s eyes too. His heart was touched by the respect which was being accorded to his little brother. He did not care about the political manoeuvrings; he was just feeling overwhelmed by the fact that I had been made the Chief of the Yadavas. But for how long would this

drama continue? Finally, it came to an end, and we left with grandfather.

This was certainly the greatest personal achievement of my life! I was extremely delighted. Most importantly, nobody could now pressurise grandfather to banish us from Mathura. How could the leader be ordered to leave the kingdom? Besides, now we would not have to repeatedly prove that we were Yadavas, and not just cowherd boys. For, it was I who was the Yadava Chief. However, if I express what I really felt, despite all that had transpired, there was no difference in the level of my anxiety. I still did not have a permanent solution to this perennial and persistent problem, which was Jarasandha. To impress the people of Mathura, I had boasted at the meeting that we had defeated Panchajanya in battle, but one could not ignore the reality. The truth was, I had killed him through a political manoeuvre. There was no question of employing the same strategy to get rid of Jarasandha. Whenever we fought him, it had to be in hand-to-hand combat. And by now, even you must have understood that it was impossible to defeat Jarasandha in hand-to-hand combat.

But let us keep those worries aside for now. I was now the leader of the Yadavas, and a Yadava leader did not worry so much. Let me talk about something positive. After this entire episode, grandfather was now completely free of anxiety. For that matter, even the lost confidence of the *Mathurawasis* had returned to a great extent. Seeing all this, I repeatedly felt like congratulating myself. What a trick I had played! Now, who would dare to ask us to leave Mathura? Grandfather was the King, and I, his dear grandson was the leader of the Yadavas. Meaning, the reins of Mathura were now completely in our hands. Truly, lies, politics, diplomacy, acting, deception, were all proving to be very appealing to me. I did not just find them appealing, in fact, day by day, I was fully imbibing all these qualities. Why not? After all, it was because of these very qualities that this leader of a small troop of cowherd boys had now become the leader of thousands of Yadavas. More interestingly, as soon as I became the leader, I also began to feel proud about my prime position. Now, I would take along my caravan of four chariots even on routines to the marketplace. And I would sit so haughtily that my very style of sitting reflected the grandeur of the Yadavas. On the other hand, the condition of the other Yadava elders had become very pitiable indeed. They were finding it quite difficult to accept an ordinary cowherd from Vrindavan as their leader. In fact, for a few days, none of them were to be seen on the streets of Mathura!

However, all this went on just for a few days. I, the new Yadava Chief, had barely met Malini a couple of times, when suddenly, worries engulfed me. And the reason behind it was bhaiya. He seemed to be strangely happy these days. No, his elation on my becoming the leader of the Yadavas had already

subsided. He was now happy at the prospect of getting an opportunity to fight with Jarasandha! Wasn't it amazing that his very happiness had unnecessarily reminded me of Jarasandha?! That danger still loomed large over our heads. Ironically, the very thought which had robbed me of my sleep, had filled him with gaiety! And the sole reason for this was that he took great pride in his prowess with the mace. But the truth was that this confidence of his was completely out of sync with the ground reality. It was not as if he was going to get an opportunity to fight Jarasandha in hand-to-hand combat. For that matter, even grandfather's faith and that of the *Mathurawasis* was misplaced. I was totally incapable of saving them from Jarasandha. How could these naïve people realise that I had indulged in all those manoeuvres only to secure our stay in Mathura!

But the question now was, what was the use of having secured a refuge? It would last only until Jarasandha attacked. When he arrived, we would anyway be rendered shelter-less, or lifeless! Meaning, I, the one who had been strutting around as a Yadava Chief, was now wallowing in anxiety day and night. Unaware of what was going on in my mind, everyone else was having fun, seeing me strut around Mathura. And funnily enough, after the dramatic boastful speech that I had delivered at the meeting of the Yadavas, grandfather and all of Mathura had become free of anxiety. It was as if Jarasandha was of no consequence at all! In contrast, I, the one in whom they had so happily reposed their faith, had lost my sleep! Even if I did not pay attention to them, my problem was that neither could I think of any concrete battle strategy that could be devised against Jarasandha, nor did it seem likely that he would get trapped in some plan or plot I could hatch. I did not know how to wield the sword or mace, or shoot an arrow. The only weapons that I knew how to use were my innate cunningness and astuteness; but at present, even those seemed to be useless against Jarasandha. That being my plight, you tell me, how was it possible for me to sleep peacefully?

But the question was, what would I gain by losing my sleep over it either? And it was not as if Jarasandha was already on his way to attack Mathura. There was still time, and hopefully, some strategy would soon come our way. Reassuring myself thus, I contented myself with such false assurances and somehow got the much-needed sleep. Furthermore, the difficulty was, no sooner did I liberate my mind from anxiety than the behaviour of the people of Mathura would force me to become restless again. Unfortunately, the more worried I was, the more relaxed and assured they were becoming due to their faith in me! It seemed that I had boasted a bit too much at that meeting with the Yadavas! Indeed, now I was feeling angry with myself for having done it. After

all, there is a limit to lying and needlessly boasting! I spent my time troubled with these thoughts and meanwhile, news of our arrival had reached Jarasandha. Our fate was sealed. All he needed was the news of our arrival, and within no time, he was all set to attack. This time around, he did not have to make any special preparations. He immediately set off for Mathura with his mighty army. When grandfather's spies brought him the news, he immediately called for me. And much to my irritation, he conveyed this grave news so cheerfully, as if Jarasandha was coming to invite us for a feast! He said, "Krishna! My spies tell me that Jarasandha's mighty army has set off for Mathura. The poor fool is coming of his own accord, playing right into the hands of Krishna!"

My heart went numb with dread when I heard this, but actually, what frightened me even more was the manner in which grandfather said it. Probably, he was the first King in history who was delighted on hearing that his kingdom was about to be attacked by a King who was several times more powerful than him! But alas, it was entirely my fault. I had been such a braggart at the meeting of the Yadavas! What could I tell grandfather now? I thought, when the fault was mine, why should I unnecessarily ruin his happiness? Thus, fixing a smile on my face, I quietly left from the palace as if I was reassuring him that what he had been thinking was right. As for me, I just did not know whom I could share my anxiety with or what I could do. I considered telling bhaiya; maybe I should have a serious discussion with him. But bhaiya was no less strange; the moment he heard the news that Jarasandha was on his way, he reached for his mace and began waving it about as if he was going to smash Jarasandha's skull right away! I smacked my forehead with my own hand in sheer frustration. I was surrounded by such insane people! Nobody was willing to understand the gravity of the situation. Bhaiya was already capricious to begin with. But now even grandfather seemed to have turned senile due to his advanced age! To tell you the truth, at this point in time, I was far more worried by bhaiya brandishing his mace and grandfather's cheerful manner of giving me the dreadful news than I was worried about Jarasandha's imminent arrival! I thought, 'Now bhaiya is naïve, but grandfather, at least you are experienced! You are a seasoned king. Why can't you come to your senses on hearing the news that Jarasandha had already set out to attack us?! Oh! My dear grandfather! If Jarasandha is coming to attack us, please convene an urgent meeting of the council of ministers! Summon the commander of the army! Why are you conveying this news only to me, a poor cowherd boy? Wake up dear grandfather, wake up! Get rid of your misplaced faith in me. Jarasandha is not playing into Krishna's hands, but he is coming to slay your dear grandson Krishna!' But how could grandfather comprehend all this? I had given such a melodramatic account of the slaying of

Panchajanya at the meeting of the Yadavas, that anybody would fall under its spell. To tell you the truth, I was very angry with myself for my speech at that meeting. In my mind, I reprimanded grandfather, 'I am immature but at least you grandfather, you are mature. So, what if I childishly said something? Will you test me by pitting me against Jarasandha? Will you get your child killed?' Anxious, I kept babbling to myself in this manner all day long. Gradually, thanks to blowing my own trumpet, this problem was becoming insurmountable. My bragging was proving to be my undoing.

The die was cast, but what could I do next? So finally, I thought, 'When the King is not serious about the impending attack on his kingdom, and when nobody else is preparing for the forthcoming battle, then why should I, who was always happy, worry unnecessarily and waste my time?' It was better that I too become a part of this foolishness that now prevailed everywhere!' Now, I could become a part of it, only by being a little foolish myself. So, I went ahead and began acting foolish. And naturally, I started with my grandfather. One day, I told him in a rather casual manner, "Did you see Jarasandha's suicidal mindset? In spite of my presence in Mathura, he has set out to attack us! But don't you worry. I am here!" Although even while saying this, I was feeling a little odd. I was reassuring him, but actually, I did want him to worry, at least a little!

I was extremely angry that a very destructive war was soon to be waged, but he, the King, was just sitting there, smiling! But all this bantering was only in my mind; as for grandfather, my bravery had made him so ecstatic that I had to quite reluctantly assume a carefree attitude in front of him. What can I say! The situation was quite pitiable. I could not think of any battle strategy whatsoever, and moreover, I had to endure this strangely carefree behaviour displayed by everyone. You can say that I was paying the penalty for being a wise person. The worst part was, though I was caught in a whirlpool of anxiety on the inside, I had to put on a smiling and cheerful mask on the outside. And amazingly, the more I smiled, the more relaxed people became! I was facing a ludicrous situation. What could I do now? Just continue to smile or die? Even when I projected seriousness, nobody was ready to sober down, and if I smiled, everyone became even more carefree. And the end result of this was, that just as time had earlier taught me to live with all my own sorrows and desires hidden within, it had now taught me how to live without revealing my anxieties as well.

No matter! At least I was getting the opportunity to enter the jaws of death with a smile on my face! Gradually, the news of Jarasandha's impending attack spread all over Mathura, but surprisingly, despite this, there was no nervousness evident among the people this time. After all, I, their hero and the leader of the Yadavas, was with them! On seeing this maddening nonchalance

prevailing all around me, my brain had virtually ceased to function. An intelligent person like me could now no longer think of a solution. Neither was anyone talking about preparing for the war, nor did anyone seem to be worrying about it. These foolish people were destined to die, but it seemed that they had decided to get me, the sensible one, killed too! Somebody has rightly said that befriending fools can even endanger your life. After much thought, there seemed to be just one way to stop this insanity – convening another meeting of the Yadava leaders and revealing certain truths about my bravery. I needed to do a volte-face and apprise everybody of the reality of the battle that we had to face. Perhaps, everybody will then come to their senses and take the impending battle with the seriousness it deserved. Indeed, the mad, carefree attitude had become so rampant now that everybody was happily discussing the news of Jarasandha's arrival as if he was coming to Mathura with thousands of gifts!

Oh well! Right now, I was the leader of the Yadavas. So, I was the one who had to convene a meeting and address it as well. It was hardly much of a speech. After I had praised myself to the skies in the previous meeting, this time, I just had to clear the air. All the while, I kept reminding myself repeatedly, 'Kanhaiya, do not boast this time around. Be careful and please, please be humble and down to earth.' Everyone, including grandfather, who heard about another meeting of the Yadavas, was astonished. Then they thought I had perhaps convened this meeting to explain the war strategy or to tell them not to panic about the outcome. In short, not a single person was trying to understand the need to prepare for the war or think seriously about it. But it did not matter; I would soon set things right. After all, this was the very objective with which I had convened the meeting. Finally, the day on which the meeting was to be held was at hand. This was a fresh new day, and I had adopted a new strategy as well, wherein, according to the new strategy, I, the new Krishna was fully prepared. This time around, I went to the meeting dressed in ordinary garments – once bitten, twice shy! However, I had sent grandfather before me this time as well. In fact, I had asked him to take bhaiya along too. Needless to say, this time, I set off with just one chariot and was also riding it myself. The strategy this time did not permit any flashy and flamboyant displays. Fortunately, the number of people at this meeting was quite remarkable. Grandfather and bhaiya were already seated on the dais, with the Yadava elite and the council of ministers. Like a poor boy, I began walking towards the stage at a slow pace. This time, I had left the chariot at the entrance. And as for my smile, I had put such a firm leash on it, that I would not have smiled even if I were to hear the funniest of jokes! I had even left my Panchajanya conch at home. Last time, it was because of the thrill of blowing it that I had got carried away and bragged a bit too much. All in all, the

message was clear. I had already boasted too much previously; now, I had to tone things down. Indeed, the sole objective of holding this second meeting was to reduce the level of insanity that had gripped the palace and the citizens of Mathura. I had to shake them out of their complacency and get them to prepare for war. But alas! What happened was exactly the opposite! Before the meeting could even begin, the situation slipped right out of my hands. The people suddenly seemed to be seized by a bout of collective insanity. I had not even reached the dais when I was applauded from all around. That was not all; then, one after another, people even started cracking jokes on Jarasandha. Moreover, I saw grandfather and the responsible ministers also enjoying these jokes. And the less said about the jokes, the better! It was as if they were not talking about Jarasandha, but some pigeon which Kanhaiya would lock into a cage in a flash! Unbelievably, a horde of people began likening me to a lion and Jarasandha to a goat! My mind was shouting, 'Ask me! Ask me who the lion is and who the goat is!' Indeed, these demented people did not seem half as dangerous when they roamed the streets alone as they appeared to be now, in the grip of this collective insanity!

Anyway, I somehow reached the podium in the midst of all the joking and the racket. My face was still downcast, and I could hear many good jokes, but was not feeling like laughing at all. On the contrary, once I was on the stage, I looked all around with a sombre expression, thinking that maybe after seeing my expression, the people would also become serious. But alas, no! Even this sorry plight of their Yadava leader made no difference to them. They thought even this was a wonderful scene that I was enacting. At least a thousand Yadavas were seated in front of me, but not a single one of them was looking grave. On the contrary, the sky was reverberating with the sound of their laughter. What could I say? Nobody was ready to listen. As soon as I opened my mouth, people started shouting slogans in my praise. I could perhaps deal with insane people one at a time; but dealing with a group of them appeared next to impossible. I did try to put forth my views a couple of times, but when collective stupidity grips a crowd, nobody listens to anything remotely sensible. And besides, how could I blame them? To a great extent, it was I who was responsible for this collective madness. Truly, I had trapped myself badly by giving such a magnificent description of the killing of Panchajanya at the meeting of the Yadavas. These fools were ecstatic for no reason. It looked as if even Nature was not in favour of my speaking the truth; that is why I was not getting an opportunity to speak!

Ah well! If that was what Nature wished, so be it. Finally, fed up of trying to get my message across, I too joined the crowd of fools. The objective

of holding the meeting was in any case, ruined. It was better to indulge in some madness with these featherbrained men. For, there was only one topic being discussed here, “When our Yadava leader has single-handedly defeated Panchajanya’s vast army, of what consequence is this Jarasandha?” How can I tell you what I was going through on hearing this? This time, my lies were proving to be a very expensive blunder indeed. And what a pack of lies it was! Jarasandha simply needed to arrive, and all this bravado would vanish into thin air! Well, so be it. At present, seeing no way out, I thought it better to join in the revelry of the fools. Anyway, there was no point in worrying now, for I could not devise any strategy, and Mathura was not interested in preparing for the war. Forget about preparing for it, nobody even wanted to discuss the war! And Jarasandha was due to arrive in another ten-twelve days. This was my last chance, but even now, nothing was falling in place. Pondering over all this, I was just about to give up when one wise, elderly Yadava bolstered my hopes by asking, “So, Kanhaiya, what are your plans for battle this time?” Naturally, on hearing this, my heart leapt with hope. But before I could answer, everybody shouted him down, saying, “What battle plans? As soon as Jarasandha shows up, he will be killed. Are you not aware of our Yadava Chief’s incredible strength?” A lone man can hardly have his say in a noisy meeting. And this is precisely what happened with the elderly person here as well. He was forced to sit down quietly in his place. Thus, even the one intelligent person who had dared to speak was silenced. I began to wonder if I was the leader of the Yadavas or a leader of fools! Actually, considering the incredible yarn that I had spun at the previous meeting, the only role I remained capable of playing now, was that of a leader of fools! And at the moment, that was precisely the position I held.

In a way, it was for the best. For, after seeing this prolonged bout of insanity, it had become difficult for me to remain detached from it. Gradually, I too became somewhat convinced of my bravery, as if it was my father, Vasudeva who ruled the whole world! And then, with this newly acquired faith in myself, I ended this meeting by saying in a very reassuring manner, “It is best to reveal the war strategy when the time is right. I am going to meet the commander today itself and discuss all the plans with him. You people do not worry and be happy. Your leader is here to take care of things. I am here!” And with this announcement, the meeting resounded with applause. Everybody returned home happily, literally dancing with joy. In a short while, the entire ground was empty. I asked bhaiya and grandfather to leave too and then slowly walked towards my chariot. I cannot describe my condition at that time. I had become a part of the madness, but I had certainly not gone insane. It is difficult to describe how everyone’s dancing and cavorting was annoying me! The people had given me

such a jolt that I had come back to my senses. There was very little time left and if something was not done swiftly, death was inevitable. Contemplating in this manner, I had reached the chariot. As soon as I boarded the chariot, on a sudden, strange whim, I raced the chariot towards the distant forest near the Yamuna. I thought, perhaps if I could distance myself a little from Mathura, my brain would begin to function again. And this was exactly what happened. After tearing through the forest on my chariot for some time, I saw a ray of hope in the form of the commander of the army. For, in the assembly of fools, he was the only one who had appeared somewhat serious. Besides, wars and battles were anyway his responsibility. I thought, why not discuss the war strategy with him. A drowning man had found a straw at least. With great hope, I turned and raced on my chariot towards the palace. As expected, by the time I reached there, evening had set in. Well, no matter, I had to somehow save myself from the dusk to set on in my life.

But what was this? Even the commander shocked me out of whatever was left of my wits! He informed me that most of the weapons in Mathura's armoury were rusted. Moreover, one fourth of the kingdom's army comprised the soldiers from Magadha, and they would never take up arms against Jarasandha. The treasury too was all but empty, so, the army was being given only half of its wages since the past several months. As a result, it was possible that even the army would not readily agree to die without a cause. Oh! So, this was the reason why the commander appeared grave. This implied that even he did not have any battle plan. He was just worried about the fact that no war strategy could be devised. Thus, this hope was dashed too; but it did not matter. After getting an overview of the situation, I assured him too, by saying, "Why are you worrying? I am here!" With this, it was quite clear that I was there for everybody and for me, there was Jarasandha! Mathura, having its faith firmly placed in me, was enjoying itself, and once Jarasandha arrived, he would make sure that I never enjoy myself again! No one was willing to understand the fact that the expectations they had of me were nothing short of expecting a miracle. And miracles are not possible in Nature. Everything occurs here according to certain laws. To obtain the desired results, one has to act, but no one was willing to do that. And anyway, by now, that opportunity had been lost too. As for me, I certainly did not wish to die unnecessarily and that is why I was desperately trying to find some possible way out of this problem. It was not that I was afraid of death; indeed, I had seen death up close several times before, but every time, I had successfully defeated it. But here, the problem was that there seemed to be no way to fight it. And to die without fighting...the mere thought was galling! There was no problem while taking on Panchajanya. There was a clear objective

behind it; I had to pay my *gurudakshina*. I had courted death over there too, but I had done so after a great amount of careful consideration. Even otherwise, life and death were of no great consequence compared to the honour of paying the *gurudakshina*. But here, I was being primed to die without any reason. Mathura was on the verge of ruin, but still, neither did anyone want to understand the situation nor was anyone willing to do anything about it. Bhaiya was there for me, but even he was of no use in this situation. I could not discuss anything with him either. All he did was go about swinging his mace, waiting for Jarasandha, as if he expected him to meekly offer his head to him and say, “Brother Balarama, please crush my head!” I cannot describe to you how furious I was. There was some limit to harbouring misconceptions. And it was not a question of my survival alone. The life of the entire population of Mathura was at stake. It was certain that after the devastation that would occur this time, Mathura, which was anyway fighting for survival, would entirely forget how to live.

Well, when there was no solution at hand, for how long could I rack my brain over it? I thought, why not live the last three-four days of my life in peace? Under such circumstances, I had just one recourse—my flute. Maybe it could assist me in living my last few days with some measure of happiness. Perhaps, with its help, I too would be able to spend these three-four days in peace, like everybody else. It was surprising; I had usually seen all the others fret and fume while I, regardless of the situation had maintained my equanimity. But this time, it was exactly the opposite. Everybody was oblivious to the danger and was happy while I was the only one who was worried sick! It goes without saying, that I was the root cause of this as well. The trouble that was about to descend on Mathura was due to me, and the happy state of mind everybody was in, was also thanks to me. What was notable was, that at this time, everybody, except me, was bent on indulging in foolishness and all of them were happy. I had never thought that even foolishness at times, could be of such great assistance in helping a person live. In a way, this was a unique experience for me. But forget about these matters; there was no end to them. Presently, I had to act upon what I had decided. So, taking my chariot, I set off alone for the banks of the Yamuna to play my flute in peace. Evening was about to set in. Meaning, I already had a reason to play my flute, and now, the time was right too. Finding solitude, I sat beneath a tree and began playing, but this time, even my flute betrayed me. Now, when I was going through a bad phase, why would my flute support me? Neither was it able to transport me to Vrindavan, nor was it able to awaken sweet memories of Radha, and nor was it able to arrange a meeting with Rukmini. In such a case, how could my flute help me with a solution for the oncoming danger? And when even my flute abandoned me, there was nothing more to be

done. I quietly went home and fell asleep.

No sooner had my flute betrayed me than by next day morning, I came back to my senses. Then I too began roaming the streets of Mathura with bhaiya, all day long. I thought, perhaps I would never get a chance to roam these streets again! Now, there was only one topic being discussed in Mathura—Jarasandha. So, whenever somebody asked me about Jarasandha, I would belt out the reply which I had learnt by rote, “I am here!” Bhaiya too would brandish his mace in the air whenever he heard about Jarasandha. After all, of what use was one’s intelligence in a city of fools? It had become our daily routine to give this reply to all the people we encountered throughout the day. This went on for a day or two, but then I thought, ‘Is this a way to end one’s life? And besides, why should it end; just because Jarasandha wanted it to? Never! Wake up Kanhaiya, wake up!’ It was a strange dilemma; neither could I spend these crucial days in worrying, nor could I surrender to death in this manner. I could not comprehend why I had got caught up in such nonsensical thoughts instead of realising such an important fact. Perhaps, the atmosphere of insanity prevailing in Mathura had affected me as well. But now, enough was enough! I thought, ‘Oh Krishna! You are a man of action; you just cannot surrender to death! Besides, Mathura is in trouble because of you, so you have to save it at all costs! So, what if Mathura is betraying you? So, what if your flute has let you down? It is not the end of the world. No Krishna, no! Come on! Think seriously about it! Think of a solution!’ With these positive thoughts reverberating in my mind, my soul, meaning the ‘Universal Benefactor’ pushed me into deep contemplation. It was incredible! The strategy that I had employed just a few months ago to kill Panchajanya was useless here. I wondered how people were able to use scriptures that were thousands of years old when I couldn’t reuse a few months’ old strategy. Perhaps they keep waiting all their lives for a miracle to happen. For that matter, what are people who shirk action capable of other than this?

This was what my problem was; once I lost myself in contemplation, I tended to flit from deliberating on one topic to another. Many a time, even the primary issue would get lost in the labyrinth of these thoughts. This was precisely the predicament I was in now. I had set out to find a solution, but here, I was thinking of something entirely different. I was thinking why not write a book that could offer solutions to people’s difficulties at all times, for all troubles! Well, what is the harm in harbouring a wish? You can desire whatever you want. But I was the one who dreamed, someone who resolved to do things. And if the idea was good, what was the point in waiting? I immediately resolved to write a book that would contain solutions for all kinds of problems! Look what I was doing! I was not able to think of even a semblance of a solution to

my present problem, and there I was dreaming of writing an extraordinary book that offered solutions for every problem in the world! A voice within me asked, 'O Krishna! Has Jarasandha's impending attack unhinged you?' I replied, 'No, my friend. I am perfectly sane. It is just that I was already dreaming of reaching the zenith of splendour and grandeur and marrying Rukmini, so what was the harm in harbouring another big dream?' It was then that I shook myself out of my reverie. Was this the time to dream? Our lives were at stake and to top it, Jarasandha would arrive anytime and shatter my reputation to smithereens. The voice said again, 'And here you are, dreaming of a book which would contain solutions to all problems for all time! Clearly, you have gone over the edge. First, find a solution to the problem called Jarasandha. Once you have done that, you can write not one but thousands of books and harbour a thousand dreams.' This was true. If I survived, I could do a thousand things. It was better to first find a solution to save myself from Jarasandha.

But before that, let me share a truth with you. Only the one who can dream of ruling over the entire universe, even when death is looming large in front of him, is capable of dreaming! In my opinion, he is the only true optimist. Who can be a greater optimist than the one who never gives up hope, regardless of circumstances? While on the subject, let me tell you one more thing. The final outcome of this dream of mine is in front of the entire world now. The Bhagavad Gita is the book which had been enunciated by me much later on in life, and which contains the solutions to all of the problems faced by humankind throughout the ages. Certainly, this book was the result of the grace of Nature and my burning desire. However, Arjuna's contribution to it was no less either. After all, it was he who had become the instrument through which this book had found expression. While we are on this subject, let me also tell you something about the secrets hidden within the Gita. The essence of the Bhagavad Gita is that a human being's soul finds a solution to every problem at any given time and under every circumstance. And the Bhagavad Gita provides the code that activates that soul within. And believe me, once the soul takes charge of a person, then no harm can ever come to him! Then the voice within spoke again, 'It's amazing, Krishna! On one hand, your mind is soaring high, you are claiming that the Bhagavad Gita has solutions for every problem of humankind hidden within itself. But on the other hand, you are still not able to find a solution for your current problem named Jarasandha!' What could I do? That was what I was thinking about. Well, coming back to Mathura, no one was even thinking seriously about the impending battle. On top of it, both the weapons and the soldiers were unprepared. Now, would I play my flute for Jarasandha? Or would I invite him for a flute-playing competition? Or, would I hand over the list

of my grand dreams to Jarasandha in the hope of tugging at his heartstrings? I did not know how to wield weapons, which could have given me some hope of displaying my bravery on the battlefield and surviving. All I knew was politics, and that was absolutely useless against Jarasandha. Meaning, I wanted to act but I just could not think of any action which could lead to a positive outcome. The voice in my mind said, 'So dive deep into your soul. Weren't you just talking about the essence of the Gita which says all the solutions lay hidden in the soul? Then save yourself and Mathura! Only then will I accept the essence of the Gita.' Did you see that? My own mind was bent on instigating me. What can I say; the mind did not want to die either. It could see all its dreams being shattered. Becoming a king or marrying Rukmini now seemed to be merely flights of fancy! All my poor mind could see was my demise, which appeared to be just a couple of days away. All in all, the situation was so pitiable that the present had come to a standstill while the future was for Jarasandha to write. Such being the case, it seemed better to seek refuge in the golden memories of my past. In Vrindavan, in spite of the myriad problems, I could at least find solace in my mother's lap or in Radha's sweet company. Neither my mother, nor Radha were here by my side; there was only bhaiya. But he, instead of helping me, was bent on pestering me by brandishing his mace at every opportunity. Did you see how even golden memories lose their warmth and turn biting cold when the time is not in your favour? For that matter, when death is close at hand, the past and the future both are automatically rendered futile.

I finally became mentally exhausted. How much could a person think? It was better to launch my *Brahmastra* - the ultimate weapon. Meaning, when you cannot find a solution to a problem then leave everything to Nature's justice. So, that was exactly what I did. I said to Nature, 'If it is appropriate for us to be saved, show me a way out or else do as you wish.' I did not know what the future held in store for me, but for the present, this little appeal to Nature did lead to a positive outcome. I became free of anxiety, I forgot about everything and became relaxed. But yes, it definitely saddened me that circumstances had knocked down a man of action like me, and had compelled me to meekly walk into the arms of death; it had not given me any leeway even to act and save myself. Perhaps, nobody else in history must have waited for death in the manner that I was waiting. Well, when my entire life, as well as my actions, had made history, awaiting death was bound to make history too. Indeed, every previous wait of mine had also been unique, whether it was waiting for Radha to arrive, or waiting to go to Vrindavan, whether it was waiting to be a King or waiting to win over Rukmini. Actually, I was thinking about such nonsensical things because I was going through a period of inaction. I had done everything

that was in my power. I had contemplated upon it as much as I could, and I had taken whatever action I could. I had lived as much as was possible, in the memories of the past and in the dreams of the future. Now, neither was there anything left for me to do nor was there anything that I could live through. I had fully accepted my death and completely surrendered to Nature. That being the case, I truly wanted to spend these last three or four days all by myself. And there was certainly no better way of doing this other than playing my flute. Yes, it had left me completely in the lurch just a few days ago, but there was no harm in trying once again. Anyway, now only three-four days remained for Jarasandha's arrival. When there was hardly any time left, and I was tired of thinking in vain for a solution, what was the harm in turning back to my old, faithful friend?

When this thought crossed my mind, I was going to Malini's house. From there, I raced my chariot and did not stop till I had reached the farthest end on the banks of the River Yamuna. Finding the opportunity, place and the solitude, I coaxed a melody out of my flute. Amazingly, now that I had surrendered myself to Nature's sense of justice, my flute began to respond to me! And now that I had regained my flute's sublime approval, of what consequence was sorrow or *karma*? I even managed to bid my final farewell to Mother Yashoda, Radha and Rukmini. However, neither did I give up my dream of becoming a King, nor did I break my resolve of creating a great scripture. In short, I had retained my desire to perform great acts and had fulfilled my worldly obligations and duties. When such a beautiful melody was issuing forth from the lips of a fighter who had surrendered himself to Nature, was it possible that a solution would not present itself? A plan suddenly flashed in my mind. Now, Jarasandha would not be able to harm me in any way! And not just me, my dear flute had devised a secure plan for all the inhabitants of Mathura as well! It is true that no harm can ever befall someone whom Nature wants to save! Once you leave your problem to Nature's sense of justice, see what happens! Having said that, if I give all the credit to Nature then what about me? My ego instantly caught hold of me, saying, 'Is it a joke to kill Krishna who is equipped with thousands of psychological weapons? No, not at all.' I thanked Nature and kissed my wonderful flute several times. I felt like dancing to my heart's content. But time did not permit this. Once I managed to survive, I would have all my life to dance. So, I immediately got down to implementing my plan. I raced my chariot straight towards home.

Back home, the first thing I did was to prepare my chariot for a long journey. As soon as the chariot was ready, I too got ready. For my plan was such that it was necessary to prepare myself mentally. Half the night had passed by the time I had finished preparations. I knew that there was little time, and

accordingly, I was full of energy as well. No sooner was I ready than I immediately woke bhaiya up. Strangely, in spite of having woken up from a deep sleep, he reached for his mace and began waving it and asked, "Has the evil Jarasandha arrived? Come, let us go and crack his head open!" I held my head in my hands in frustration. I silently pulled him out of our room. If our parents woke up from the noise, my plan would fall flat. But then, what should I do? For, right now, going by bhaiya's mood, I could clearly see that trouble had still not been completely averted; it had just changed its form. First, it was Jarasandha, and now it was bhaiya! Getting caught up in one thing or the other had perhaps become my destiny. It was certain that we were in no position to win a battle against Jarasandha, and it was also certain that even if we surrendered to him, he would not spare our lives. And still, bhaiya was displaying such enthusiasm...I ignored it because time was scarce and the task had to be accomplished as soon as possible. So, without beating around the bush, I came to the point. I said, "My dear brother! Jarasandha has not arrived but he certainly will. You please get ready and board the chariot. And yes, please take some extra clothes with you!"

Bhaiya gave me a puzzled look that clearly said, "If Jarasandha has not yet arrived, then why are we getting into a chariot?" His surprise was understandable. I thought, 'Fine! Let me just tell you where we are going and why'. Considering the shortage of time, I thought it best to come straight to the point rather than beat around the bush, and said, "Neither has Jarasandha reached Mathura yet, nor are we going to battle!"

This time, bhaiya also verbalised his thoughts. In a surprised voice, he asked, "Then where are we going so late in the night carrying extra clothes?"

Sighing heavily, I replied, "Bhaiya, we are going far away from Mathura."

He asked firmly, "Why?"

I replied, "Because I do not think we are capable of fighting Jarasandha."²⁴

Hearing these words, his demeanour changed radically. He spoke in a very loud and firm voice, "Then don't say that we are going far from Mathura. Say that we are fleeing from Mathura in fear! Why don't you frankly say that we are tucking in our tails and running away from Jarasandha!"

This time, I too lost my cool. Death was hovering above our heads and here, he was arguing. I snapped, "You can think that if you wish."

Bhaiya spoke, "Since the past several days, you have been strutting about assuring people saying, 'I am here! I am here!' What about that?"

I lovingly took hold of his hand and with a slight smile replied, "That

was a mistake. But now I am telling you, I am not there. I am not there!”

Seeing my shamelessness, bhaiya’s anger increased exponentially, and angrily pulling his hand away from mine, he emphatically stated, “If you want to, you can run. I cannot flee from a battle!”

I already knew that bhaiya would not readily agree to flee from a battle. He always believed that one should always fight to the finish. But I had never thought that it would be so difficult to make him understand. Anyway, I had to make him see reason at any cost. Thus, to try and explain this to him, I spoke very patiently and humbly, “We are merely leaving the battlefield, not the war itself! Remember, lifting a sword against a sword is not the only kind of bravery. To save oneself from being killed by a sword is also a sign of bravery and that too, bravery with intelligence.”

Hearing this somewhat philosophical explanation, this time, bhaiya turned his head and said a bit pompously, “Very well then, you exhibit this bravery laced with intelligence. I am comfortable with the bravery displayed with a mace!”

I realised that it would not be very easy to make bhaiya flee from the war, but I had to persevere. Otherwise, neither would bhaiya survive, nor would I. Actually, my calculation was very simple. If I wanted to avoid a war with Jarasandha, I would have to battle with bhaiya till the end. And right now, it was much easier to fight with bhaiya. Thus, even though time was short, I had to explain everything to him in detail. I tried to explain the situation to him in many ways. I elaborated on Jarasandha’s strength, Mathura’s battle preparedness, and other things. After much effort, I managed to take the sting out of his raging anger. Becoming calmer now, he considered what I had said. Thereafter, he thoughtfully asked, “Everything is fine, but if we leave the battle and do a disappearing act, what will the people of Mathura think about us?”

Hearing his childish query, I got irritated. I replied in an annoyed tone, “Even to hear whatever they have to say, we need to be alive, right bhaiya?”

We had taken two steps forward and four steps back! Bhaiya had wiped out the argument I had made so far. Once I had got his mind off the war, his ego had come to the fore. This is the problem with all human beings. They can deal with just about anything else, but they just do not know how to deal with their ego! But the simple truth is that a person who cannot deal with his own ego wastes away his life in useless pursuits. I let it go, for now was not the time for such contemplation. I just wanted to flee from Mathura along with bhaiya as quickly as possible. But I could do that only if bhaiya would agree! However, I had a range of *Brahmastras* to counter bhaiya’s reluctance. Wherever there is love, there is no dearth of such weapons. And it was quite evident to me that I

could not accomplish anything now, without employing a *Brahmastra*. So, I finally used the ultimate weapon. I feigned as if I was leaving and asked him, “Are you coming or should I go alone?”

But surprise! Bhaiya merely shook his head, signalling me to go. So, had my ultimate weapon failed? My brother, who could not live without me even for a single day, was being so adamant! I thought, ‘Let me set things right now by using my *Maha Brahmastra* - the supreme weapon’. So, acting as if I was leaving, I placed my luggage on the chariot. But even this did not have any effect on bhaiya. Fine, I even boarded the chariot, but bhaiya was still standing resolutely, watching every action of mine with a stubborn expression on his face. No matter, I knew I would be able to get him down from the lofty stance he had taken by making him emotional. So, taking hold of the reins, I turned my head towards him and said melodramatically, “Bhaiya, my childhood has been blessed by your love. You were the one who held my hand and taught me how to walk. You have protected me from all kinds of danger. And today, when I am left with no refuge, you are leaving me alone. You are not even ready to accompany me.”

I could notice my *Brahmastra* beginning to show its effect. Bhaiya seemed to thaw a little. Sensing the opportunity, I put on a more sorrowful expression and almost in tears, I said, “If Jarasandha captures me, then I will embrace death. I will tell him, ‘Kill me, if you want to, but remember, if my brother had been here with me today, he would have cracked your head open!’”

Saying this, I got the chariot moving a few feet forward. Again, I turned and looked directly into his eyes. Bhaiya had completely thawed. So, my weapon had found its mark. This is the speciality of the *Brahmastra*; it never misses its mark! The particular weapon used at this time was, of course, the emotional *Brahmastra*. I had innumerable such weapons in my arsenal. The *Brahmastras* of ‘ego’, ‘drama’, ‘fear’ and ‘self-confidence.’ I knew that bhaiya could tolerate anything, but he could not bear to see me in trouble. After all, I was his younger brother, so it was natural that I would have some petulant demands and would play-act a little. At any rate, this was my right. Well, now, all that remained was to enact the final scene of this act. Bhaiya seemed all set to capitulate completely. Thus, I immediately got down from the chariot, forced tears into my eyes, bent down and touched his feet to get his blessings. Then I once again got into the chariot and sat there with a forlorn look on my face. For some time, silence prevailed. Naturally, I had to make the final move too. I took up the reins of the chariot, as if I was all set to ride off from his life forever, I said, “All right, bhaiya, I am leaving. Perhaps, we will never meet again!” Saying this, I now moved the chariot a few more paces forward. Halting once again, I looked at him. His soft heart had melted down completely. Poor bhaiya!

Despite his extreme reluctance, he fumbled, quietly bundled up his belongings and sat down in the chariot with me, without uttering a word. This meant that his anger was still intact. Meaning, he had merely come with me out of compulsion. Now, whether he had come because of compulsion or of his own accord, my mission was accomplished!

As soon as bhaiya sat in the chariot, I breathed a huge sigh of relief. Deep down in my heart, I was quite delighted, but yes, I did not let this happiness reflect on my face. Did I want to die? If bhaiya were to see my delight, wouldn't he immediately jump off the chariot? Wouldn't he realise that I had played a trick on him? Did you see Krishna's *leela*? All of Mathura was sleeping and their leader was fleeing. Truly, I do not know why people found this *Rannchhod* (one who flees from the battlefield) form of mine so endearing. And like so many other names, this name *Rannchhod* too got lovingly added to the long list of names that I had already acquired. However, diametrically opposed to this, when Arjuna wanted to become a *Rannchod* at the very onset of the Mahabharata war, you would remember how firmly I had dissuaded him. I had enunciated the entire Gita to him so that he would not leave the battlefield. How could there be two *Rannchods* in history? Oh well, I am just joking. Actually, Arjuna wanted to leave the battlefield because of fear and attachment, which was not at all acceptable to me. There was negativity behind his fleeing from the war, whereas the reason behind my retreating from the battlefield was *Ahimsa* - non-violence. Neither did I want to die, nor did I want bhaiya to get killed. I also did not want *Mathurawasis* to get slaughtered unnecessarily. If you look at the circumstances carefully, there was nothing but positivity in my fleeing from the battlefield. And if I were to explain this more elaborately, then it is the midpoint between contradictions that actually represents the truth. And throughout my life, I was able to stand with the truth because I knew very well how to maintain a balance between two contradictory ideas. Did you understand this point? Let me explain it to you. There was no one in the world, more deceitful than me; therefore, there could be no one in the world who was as innocent as me either. Because I was the most egotistical of all, it was difficult to find someone who was as ego-less as me. And it was because of this ego-less nature that this *Rannchod* was able to vehemently oppose Arjuna's decision of fleeing from the battlefield. If an egotistical person had left the battlefield, he would never have been able to muster the courage to stop another person from doing the same. He would have thought, what if the person whom he was stopping from fleeing from the battlefield, turned around and asked him as to why he had beaten a hasty retreat from the battle?

To put it in a nutshell, there is a time for everything in this world. There

is a time to be egotistical; there is a time to display anger. There is a time to confront the enemy in a war and a time to flee from it. It is time that decides what a man has to do and when. For instance, this was the time for me to abandon the battlefield and that is why I was running away. But when Arjuna wanted to flee, that was the time to stand and fight.

He had been overwhelmed by attachment at an inappropriate time, which was why I had opposed his decision. I was not the kind to flee from the battlefield and had never before done so. I had never been scared, and no one could ever instill fear in me either. But yes, in my opinion, killing someone or sacrificing one's own life should be the last resort. However, even if one does choose to fight as a last resort, one cannot fight to lose. Life is another name for victory. To give in easily or to be ready to die at any given moment are the traits of a loser. At present, time favoured Jarasandha, and respecting time, is a sign of intelligence. Challenging time is akin to inviting death. Since time favoured Jarasandha right now, it was best to flee. When the tide of time turned in our favour, we would either have a bigger army than his, or an opportunity to combat Jarasandha alone would present itself; or maybe one of my political manoeuvres would prove successful. What I mean to say is, when time changes, everything else will change too. But I would definitely need to have patience for it to change.

Presently, we, the deserters, had set off on our journey. I had my chariot racing ahead at top speed. I was not aware in which direction I was headed in. All I knew was that we were travelling in the opposite direction from the region where Jarasandha and his army would launch their attack. What made the trip pleasant from the very beginning was the fact that even though bhaiya was there with me, I was actually still all alone. There was no conversation between us at all. As he had accompanied me in the chariot only because he was compelled to, it was natural that the pressure he was under was reflecting in his behaviour towards me. You know quite well that bhaiya was in the chariot at this time only because he was trapped by my *Brahmastra*; otherwise, he would still be waiting in Mathura for Jarasandha to arrive. That is why he was still very annoyed with me. Since he was not able to do anything else, he was displaying his irritation on being made to flee by not talking to me. I left him alone, but while riding the chariot, I kept glancing at him. Naturally, I wanted to check whether his anger was subsiding. But there was absolutely no sign of it. A brave hero like Balarama had fled from the battlefield! How could his ego allow his anger to subside so easily? Well, let him remain angry. If he was doing his *karma*, then I too was doing just that. I continued riding the chariot, moving further away from Jarasandha. Now it was nearly dawn, but there was no question of stopping the

chariot. The fear of Jarasandha was such that I still kept racing my chariot. What if Jarasandha learned that the two boys had fled in a chariot and he then sent ten or twenty chariots in pursuit? Meaning, if our lives were in danger, even after being disgraced for fleeing from the battlefield, then our loss would be doubled. And you very well know that Krishna could not enter a loss-making deal.

Well, the sun had risen by now, but the light of peace still refused to shine through bhaiya's dark mood. And I did not dare to talk to him while he was upset, especially since I was the cause of his fury. Therefore, I continued to ride the chariot at a rapid pace. Soon, we reached near a lake. I quietly stopped by it, alighted and washed my face and hands. I released the horses and took them to the lake to drink water. After that, I sat down on a rock to rest. Eventually, bhaiya too got down and refreshed himself. However, he then sat at a distance from me. To me, this behaviour of his was sufficient indication of the intensity of his resentment. Even so, like a good brother, I mustered courage and looked over at him with a smile. But what was this?! He promptly looked away! No matter, I decided to be brazen and steeling myself, I tried to speak with him a couple of times more, but he was still adamant. He simply refused to answer any of my questions. Whenever I said something to him, he would promptly turn his face away. In short, it did not seem that his anger would subside so easily. We did not even know where we were, or where we were going; and on top of it, there was bhaiya's childish attitude. Where we were, did not matter much. But we definitely had to think about where we had to go. And to mull over that, we needed to talk. But my brother was not even willing to look at me. It did not matter; I decided to contemplate over it myself.

Now, my opinion was that we would be far safer in any of the kingdoms ruled by Jarasandha's enemies. Still, it would have been better if I could have had bhaiya's opinion on the matter. But seeing bhaiya's anger, it did not seem as if he would give any opinion in the immediate future. Finally, not finding any way out, I began consoling myself, 'Kanhaiya, just smile and endure every difficulty that comes your way. Sooner or later, the dark clouds will dissipate. But first, give them time to become darker, denser. For, until the sky is completely dark, it is impossible for a ray of light to burst through.' Sooner or later, bhaiya would calm down. And besides, I had to attend to several urgent matters other than mollifying my peeved bhaiya. Thus, I quietly engaged myself in them. First of all, I fed the horses, and then I plucked some fruits for us. We also had some food in the chariot and as a final attempt to appease bhaiya, I set it all as a sumptuous feast in front of him. My intentions were clear; I wanted him to see it as a royal spread, and I also hoped that he would cool down once his hunger was satiated. Fortunately, after showing some reluctance, bhaiya did

finally eat. This was his speciality; he would never vent out his anger on his stomach. This was certainly a good thing for me. Once he had eaten, there was a chance that he might soon start talking too. As I had expected, his mood seemed to change a bit after the meal, and he certainly appeared to have calmed down to some extent. I thought, this was the right time to muster courage and speak to him once again. And speaking to him about our current situation would appear more natural. At least, it would not appear that I was trying to appease him. It was with this thought that I asked him, “In your opinion, where do you think we should go now?”

He promptly retorted dramatically, “Where else can we go except for a pilgrimage? After all, those who flee from a battlefield go on a pilgrimage!”

I understood; bhaiya’s anger was very much intact. But so what! Even the hardest rock eventually gets eroded one day, if water is constantly poured upon it. I was glad; I took solace in the fact that he was at least responding now, even though his replies were curt and dripping sarcasm. Taking this as a good sign, I took our conversation forward and asked, “Why don’t we go to Chandak at Vaivasvatpur?”

Hearing this, bhaiya became furious, and in rage, he lashed out, “And, what will you tell him? ‘Look Chandak! We, the heroes who had killed Panchajanya, have come running to you to seek shelter because we are scared of Jarasandha!’ You know Kanhaiya, running after the gopis and fooling around with girls has rusted your bravery! But you better keep this in mind; I am still a brave hero!”

No matter, Bhaiya could be as sarcastic as he wanted to, but I had to keep the conversation going. Thus, I continued with great humility, “Alright then, we will not go to Chandak, but you tell me; where else should we go?”

This time, he replied with irritation, “The decision to flee from the battle was yours. So, you decide where we will go now. I will merely sit in the chariot just like I did while fleeing from the battlefield!”

Clearly, bhaiya’s anger was not going to abate as easily as I had thought. I would have to jump through many more hoops. But I decided to do that later and for the time being, gave up trying to pacify him. What if he lost his temper again after taking so long to calm down? I would have to suffer the consequences! I immediately prepared the chariot and we took off in an unknown direction. My only calculation was that if we travelled on a familiar path, it would be easier for Jarasandha to find us. For about four days, we continued travelling in this manner; I kept racing my chariot in an unknown direction, without any concrete thought in mind. There was no question of entering or travelling through towns, for there was the risk that if we were recognised, Jarasandha would surely get to hear of it. All in all, during these four days, I was bound by just one routine: getting the chariot ready in the morning, riding it throughout the day, unharnessing the horses during our evening and night halts, trying to converse with bhaiya after dinner and finally, giving up after futile attempts and playing my flute to drive away my fatigue. My continual efforts were gradually bearing fruit. Bhaiya’s anger definitely seemed to be abating day by day. But I have to admit that its pace was incredibly slow. I had not spared any effort to calm bhaiya’s anger, and at this point, there was nothing more that I could do. The situation was such that to act was in my hands but the

fruits of action depended on bhaiya!

During this period, we lost our way and were stranded in a dense and desolate forest for two days. There was no sign of human settlements as far as we could see. During these two days, we were forced to survive on raw and semi-ripe fruits. This scarce and fitful supply of barely edible food completely destroyed whatever progress I had made in assuaging bhaiya's anger. Didn't you understand? How was it ever possible that bhaiya's anger would not increase after his stomach was made to endure such an ordeal?! It was fortunate that on the third day, we came across a settlement. I breathed a sigh of relief and parked the chariot in front of a sweetshop. Now we did not have any shortage of money; so, we not only devoured all kinds of delicacies but even got a lot of them packed. Once our hunger was satiated, the situation looked a little stable. Bhaiya appeared to be calming down. Now that bhaiya was calmer, it was necessary to calm the horses as well; they needed rest too. While the horses rested, even we took the opportunity to rest for a while. During this interval, I tried to establish eye contact with bhaiya a couple of times, but it was all in vain. Well, it was fine by me! For now, our journey resumed, and I hoped that bhaiya's anger would eventually subside. However, where we were headed, where we would halt for the night were questions that still remained to be answered. For that matter, even bhaiya's anger was still intact to a large extent. But whether he talked to me or not, it was time to decide where to seek refuge. We could not senselessly wander around in the forest. I was riding the chariot lost in these thoughts, when I saw an ascetic walking towards us. I immediately stopped the chariot and greeted him. And while greeting him, I also jumped down from the chariot. By now, even bhaiya had alighted and was standing beside me. We were standing beside the chariot, and the ascetic was standing in front of us. Everything was going well so far, but I don't know what struck me, that to initiate a conversation, I asked him his name.

My request for his introduction proved to be a grave mistake. Suddenly, he became angry and said, "An ascetic is an ascetic. He does not have any identity. Why don't you tell me who you are?"

For a moment, I was badly rattled by his stern voice. However, I soon composed myself and introducing myself, I said, "I am Krishna, and this is my brother Balarama. We are inhabitants of Mathura. Compelled by circumstances beyond our control, we had to kill Kansa, the King of Mathura. And as Kansa was the son-in-law of the Magadha's King Jarasandha, he is now baying for our blood. We are trying to save ourselves from Jarasandha and seek refuge. In fact, we do not even know where exactly we are now."²⁵

The ascetic promptly replied, “Oh, so you are Krishna. I have heard of you. Aren’t you the one who killed Panchajanya to pay your *gurudakshina*?”

I was secretly pleased, delighted to note that my fame had spread far and wide. Still, I controlled my elation and merely nodded my head in acknowledgment. It was enough for me that his attitude towards me had changed for the better on knowing who I was. He had become very courteous now. Thereafter, he continued speaking in a very calm voice, “Since you have been a student of the great *Acharya* Sandipani, you do not need to learn much; however, please do not take offense when I say it, but the fact is, Sandipani is not very proficient in the art of politics and warfare. Therefore, I will give you some advice. Anyone who seeks refuge is weak, and no one likes to give shelter to the weak. A hero, who has killed the likes of Kansa and Panchajanya, ought to be his own refuge. So, become your own refuge. In other words, give up this business of looking for refuge and focus on increasing your strength. You may run as much as you want to, and hide your identity as much as you can, but in the end, Jarasandha will certainly find you. Do not forget, almost all the Kings in the Aryavarta belt are under his influence. I agree that by killing Kansa and Panchajanya, you have not only proved your valour but also destroyed two vile sinners. This itself makes you great. Even so, remember, a hero has to combine his self-interest with the interest of humankind at large. Meaning, you should ensure that what is in your interest is also in the interest of all. In my opinion, gaining wealth and becoming a King is not only good for you but it is also good for all. For, common people can be happy only when wealth and power are in the hands of good and worthy people. Remember, wealth and power enhance each other. Therefore, my advice to you is that you should increase your wealth, gain power and become stronger. Only then will you be able to permanently save yourself from Jarasandha. And yes, while advising you, I almost forgot to answer your original question. As of now, you are very far from Mathura and on the border of the kingdom of Vidarbha.”

The advice given by the ascetic shook the very foundations of my knowledge. He was such a great and knowledgeable sage! I had to admit that he had given us the right advice at the right time and shown us the right direction. For that matter, giving the right knowledge at the right time is itself the sign of a great ascetic. I began to wonder, was this ascetic an instrument sent by Nature? Had Nature’s wish become one with my dream of scaling the heights of glory and grandeur? Perhaps, yes. This was why, in just a few moments, I had gained knowledge which would otherwise take years to learn, and that too, when it was least expected! And if this was the case, then has this aimless wandering come about only to unlock the doors to my becoming all-powerful?

But all these were matters pertaining to the future. Right now, it was imperative that I resolved my current problem. And before the ascetic walked away on seeing me lost in thought, I pulled myself back to reality, and folding both my hands with great humility, I said, “Truly, your suggestion that I should become stronger has given my life a new direction. This single advice of yours has saved us from wandering aimlessly; but I beg your pardon, until we gain more strength, we would certainly need to seek refuge. And since we are not from a royal family, we are not at all familiar with the politics of Aryavarta. To tell you the truth, we are also completely ignorant about who Jarasandha’s allies are and who his enemies are. But if my estimation is correct, Karvirpur is not very far from Vidarbha. And, I think that King Shringlava of Karvirpur is a Yadava and he is also a distant relative of ours. I feel we will definitely get refuge in his kingdom. I would like to know your opinion about this.”

As soon as he heard this, the ascetic laughed aloud. Then, still roaring with laughter, he said, “Truly, you are completely ignorant of the politics of Aryavarta! Shringlava is extremely selfish, cruel and arrogant. He does not care for caste, clan or relationships. He is intoxicated with power. He has imprisoned many priests and *Acharyas* of his kingdom. It is quite possible that he will grant you refuge on one hand, and on the other, he will make a deal with Jarasandha for your life. It is also quite likely that after spending one night in his kingdom, you may wake up to find that you have become Jarasandha’s prisoner!”

I was badly shaken; this meant that under the present circumstances, we needed to become familiar with the political scenario in the Aryavarta belt and all the Kings in that region. Our lack of knowledge could get us killed any time. It was Nature’s grace that it had sent this ascetic as an instrument to save us; if I had followed my intellect, I would have gone straight to King Shringlava’s kingdom to seek refuge. And had we done that, perhaps we would have rotted in Jarasandha’s prison all our lives, or maybe, he would have killed us! Indeed, something quite terrible could have happened. But forget it, why think about something which has not happened? And going by what had transpired, I had begun to believe that Nature was bent on saving me under all circumstances. Had this not been the case, then I would not have had the idea of fleeing from the battlefield. Well, even if I were not to think so optimistically, at the very least, I would not have met this great ascetic who had shown us the right path at the right time. I had anyway seen how knowledgeable I was about political matters! Also, day by day, I was realising the extent of Jarasandha’s influence and dominance over the Aryavarta region. Neither could we enter a kingdom which was friendly with Jarasandha, nor could we use our intellect and seek refuge from a King whom we knew. And now, I was even afraid of going to a

King who was Jarasandha's enemy. Who knew when he might change loyalties under Jarasandha's influence? To tell you the truth, I felt as if no place on this earth could provide us with a safe haven. Still, we had to survive, so I thought, since my intelligence was not providing a solution, why not ask the ascetic to help? So, in a very helpless voice, I asked him straight away, "So, where do you suggest we go?"

The ascetic promptly replied, "To the Gomanta Mountain; given your current circumstances, that place is safe in every respect. The mountains all around and the dense forest cover will keep you safe and secure, like a child in its mother's lap. This mountain is so high that it is impossible to climb. I have also heard that about two thousand years ago, there used to be a thriving settlement on this mountain. However, it was destroyed due to some natural disaster and has turned into a mountain. Currently, there are no settlements anywhere close to it and no one ventures there either. There is a settlement of tribal people a little distance away from this mountain, and that is the last point your chariot will be able to reach. After that, you will have to walk for a considerable distance to reach the mountain and climb it. And as I had said, the climb will certainly not be easy."

I was filled with enthusiasm on hearing this from the ascetic. We could at least save our lives now. So, his second advice had also been excellent. All of a sudden, I became full of self-confidence. And I confidently said to the ascetic, assuring him, "Do not worry. We are cowherds. We are used to roaming in dense forests and climbing mountains."

Hearing me, the ascetic replied gravely, "I am glad to hear that. There is, however, one more thing you should be careful about. This mountain falls on the boundary of Karvirpur. Therefore, you will not only have to be on guard at all times, but you should also not reveal your true identities to anyone."

Touching the ascetic's feet, I said, "You have shown us the right path in life. Indeed, by cautioning us not to go to Shringlava, you have given us a new lease of life. You have also directed us to a safe hideout. You have appeared before us like a guru in the form of the Supreme Soul. Thus, if you do not mind, I would like to know who you are." The ascetic replied, "It is enough for you to know that I am Parshuram."

Hearing the ascetic's curt reply, my curiosity to ask anything further was automatically quelled. Truly, more than the name and whereabouts of ascetics, it is their knowledge that holds significance. And he had already given us much more than a glimpse of that. Having taken his blessings, I was about to take leave and turn away, when I noticed that his water pot was empty. I thought, if I could be of small service to this ascetic, it would be my good fortune. With this

thought, I humbly said, “O teacher! Give your water pot to me; I will fetch water for you.”

He brusquely replied, “No. I am the one who is thirsty, so I will myself fetch water.”

I was silenced. Was there any question of anyone winning against great *Acharyas* and ascetics? After all, even though I was self-realised, I was leading the life of an ordinary person. And of what consequence was a common man in front of a true ascetic? Quietly, I touched his feet and we took our leave. I felt blessed on having met such a great saint. Truly, in a matter of moments, this great ascetic, having taken the form of a teacher, had taught me whatever remained to be learnt in addition to what we learnt at Sandipani’s *ashram*. First, it was *Acharya* Shrutiketū, then, it was *Acharya* Sandipani, and now, there was this great ascetic, Parshuram! I considered myself very fortunate, that even though I was a mere cowherd boy, I had got the opportunity to meet such great souls! Well, having shown us the right path, the ascetic went on his way. I stood and watched him walk away for quite some time. In fact, I kept gazing at him with admiration until I lost sight of him. Now there was no ambiguity about where we had to go. Bhaiya had already resumed his seat in the chariot; I too jumped in immediately and took the reins in my hands. Now, there was fresh enthusiasm in the manner in which I was riding; we were racing towards the settlement of the tribal people. I was so elated, that I had absolutely forgotten that bhaiya was still annoyed with me. So, without thinking, in great excitement, I gushed, “Did you see that, bhaiya? He was such a great ascetic! What he taught us was so enlightening! When I asked him for his water pot, did you hear what he said?! ‘No, I am the one who is thirsty; I will myself fetch water!’ Wow!”

Bhaiya immediately snorted and replied, “No, Kanhaiya, I was there, and I saw it all. It was just an excuse to avoid giving you the water pot. He was scared of you because he thought if you could flee from the battlefield, you could certainly run away with his water pot! And what did the poor man possess other than that pot? If you had made away with even that, he would have surely died of thirst and attained instant salvation!”

I was silenced. Bhaiya’s caustic sarcasm instantly reminded me that he was still extremely angry with me. I really had no clue when or how his anger would abate. And now he had even learnt to pass sarcastic comments. But it did not matter; I too had learnt how to adapt to every situation. And as far as the journey was concerned, it was still going on...

Chapter 7

Seeking Refuge In The Gomanta Mountain

We were passing through dense forests. There were no settlements or houses as far as our eyes could see. Bhaiya was still not talking to me, so, as I rode the chariot, I began analysing the ascetic's words. His advice that I should increase my power and earn wealth was truly inspirational. But the question was, how would all this come to pass? The voice within reprimanded me instantly, 'Stop it, Krishna! Why have you engaged yourself in thinking about the future, forgetting the present?' That was true; who knew when my power would increase, when I would become a King, and when I would win over Rukmini? The voice advised again, 'So why not set aside your dreams and return to reality? Right now, you and your brother are alone and that too without any kind of help. At present, your only objective is to save yourselves from Jarasandha and for that, the Gomanta Mountain is the only safe destination. Keep riding the chariot in that direction.' Well, that too was right. I focussed once again on our journey as we passed through the forest. Bhaiya was still sulking, and I was not supposed to get lost in dreams; so, I kept myself occupied by gazing at the dense forest cover.

Finally, by the next afternoon, we reached the tribal settlement. To tell you the truth, the moment I entered this settlement, I felt a sense of security. The village was small but picturesque. There were barely around two hundred people living in the twenty, twenty-five mud and stone huts spread all around. Ever since we had departed from Mathura, we had been pining to see other humans, and so we were happy to see even this small settlement. I had just halted the chariot on entering the settlement, when a few tribal people gathered around us. We quickly jumped down from the chariot. And since we were strangers who had entered the settlement, as expected, these people led us to their leader, whose name was Adeshwar. Thankfully for us, he appeared to be a very pleasant and wise person. He first asked us the reason for our visiting this area, and also wanted to know who we were. As we had to hide our identities, we had to introduce ourselves with a false identity, and you already know that bhaiya could not bring himself to tell even a simple lie! It was I who had to do it, as I was the one responsible for being in this situation. As such, I was an expert in this art right from childhood and went on to remain one throughout my life! So, I immediately replied, "We have come from Vidarbha. The saint Parshuram had suggested that we go to Gomanta Mountain to perform austerities and we have

come here following his instructions.”

Hearing this, Adeshwar said, “Then you are our guests. We revere saint Parshuram and his followers. Please accept our hospitality and allow us to serve you.”

We too needed some rest, and if you get what your heart desires, where is the question of refusing it? Surprisingly, Adeshwar proved to be a great host. He immediately allotted us one hut to stay. It was just what we needed, because, after only a short rest, we felt completely invigorated. However, you may find it hard to believe, that there were no sleeping mats or blankets in the hut, and we had to sleep on a bed of leaves! But in spite of that, both of us began snoring as soon as we lay down. This was obviously the result of our non-stop journey. Perhaps, only the ones who do not work hard require comfortable beds. Anyway, as soon as I woke up, I went for a walk around the settlement. The most remarkable feature of this settlement was that it was built to be unobtrusive, so that from the outside, it appeared to be a part of the forest. We were fortunate that the ascetic, Parshuram, had informed us about this settlement. That was why we were looking for it, or else we would have missed it. After strolling around the settlement a couple of times, I headed towards our hut. Bhaiya was sitting outside, on the ground. I too sat down beside him quietly. It had been only a short while since we had been sitting there when Adeshwar arrived and invited us to the evening’s celebration. On hearing about the celebration, our faces lit up. Naturally, if two poor boys who had been wandering aimlessly around the forest got the chance to partake in a celebration, what more could they ask for? Well, my happiness was not a big deal, but bhaiya becoming happy... that was indeed a good sign for my future!

Anyway, as soon as evening set in, drums and cymbals began resounding all around. Enthused, bhaiya and I too dashed off from our hut to be a part of the celebration. Everyone was sitting in an open square situated at the end of the settlement. The torches that were placed on the tree trunks, illuminated the entire square making it look surreal. What was worth noting was that, we were made to sit next to Adeshwar. Right across where we were seated, four women were busy preparing food for everyone. Meanwhile, cups of wine had also started arriving for the men. Seeing the wine, bhaiya’s face lit up. I sipped a little out of courtesy, but bhaiya really got down to it. I did not know whether to look at bhaiya, who was happy after what seemed like ages, or at the splendid ambience all around me. Seated in style on the ground beside Adeshwar, I gave equal attention to both. About twenty people were sitting with us. Right in front, at a little distance from us, children were playing and running around and far beyond them, I could see the women still extremely busy cooking for the entire community. Some

pairs and groups of men and women also dotted the entire ground. I had captured this lovely scene in my memory forever.

Not long after, the song and dance programme began. Several women were dancing and singing, and the men accompanied them with their drums. As the night progressed, people began to indulge in excessive drinking, including bhaiya, who showed no signs of stopping. The good thing about it was that with the wine in his system, his anger had vanished. It was a good sign; at least he appeared happy after so many days of sullenness. For obvious reasons, there was no question of my stopping or cautioning him. Sitting with one knee raised up, he was sitting as if he had no intention of getting up any time soon! All this was fine but seeing everybody dance and sing, I was feeling strange. I too felt like dancing and longed to play the flute. But despite this, I stifled my desire and continued sitting quietly, for, hiding my identity was even more important. Honestly speaking, this stifling of my desire was also one of the new experiences of my life. Didn't you see how my time had changed that I could no longer play my flute! However, this time around, it was easy to placate my heart, because considering our present situation, was it not more than enough that I was getting a chance to enjoy some singing and dancing as a spectator? But this too seemed to be dragging on for a bit too long. There seemed to be no signs of it coming to an end. I was terribly hungry, but the food was to be served only at the end of the festivities. Finally, the festivities came to an end, and the meal was served. But then there was a big problem. The main course of the meal was raw meat, which was not at all to our liking. In the end, we had no choice but to go to bed hungry. It is true, I suppose, that when you are going through a lean phase, nothing goes right. This too was a one-of-a-kind experience.

Well, the next day, I woke up early and went out for a stroll. The walk was only an excuse. The truth was that I was very hungry and was hoping to find some fruit in the forest to eat and bring back with me. Hungry as a bear, I began grumbling in my mind. 'What a strange kind of hospitality this is, where we have to arrange for our food ourselves!' Fortunately, the forest was laden with fruits and flowers. I ate to my heart's content and then brought back quite a lot of fruits. Bhaiya, the happy soul that he was, had woken up right at the time of the meal. Unexpectedly finding fresh fruits for breakfast, he jumped with joy. He ate to his heart's content and polished everything off. At the same time, Adeshwar came to invite us for the afternoon meal. Fortunately, on seeing us devouring the fruits with such relish, he understood what we liked to eat. So, he immediately sent some men to the forest to gather fresh fruits. Suddenly, I found both Adeshwar's wisdom and hospitality quite praiseworthy. Truly, self-interest changes a person's perspective so swiftly! Well, that was about the first morning

in the settlement. In just a few days, bhaiya appeared to like the company of the forest dwellers so much, that in a way, he had almost settled down here! I too was enjoying myself immensely. Nevertheless, I was still cautious and wanted to take refuge on the Gomanta Mountain as soon as possible. Even so, I was reluctant to disturb bhaiya's merrymaking, especially since he appeared to be well on his way to becoming his normal self again. And it was extremely important for me that he returned to his normal state of mind, for I did not know the number of days, months or even years, I would have to spend alone with him at the top of the mountain. And besides, after my long, stressful journey, even I was getting the much-needed rest here, living with these tribal people. On the other hand, the possibility of Jarasandha finding us here any time soon also appeared to be remote. That being the case, what was the harm if bhaiya enjoyed himself for a few more days?

Now, though bhaiya did not have anything to worry about, I was facing a problem. No, Jarasandha had not dropped in for a visit, and he could not come either. For, firstly, we had quickly fled from Mathura during the night, and secondly, we were so far from Mathura now, that finding our whereabouts or reaching us was extremely difficult. The problem was that the festivities held here daily, reminded me of Vrindavan. To add to my woes, I could not play my flute either. It was not just the structure of the settlement, or the nature of the festivities, but even the love that this close-knit community shared, strongly reminded me of Vrindavan. The truth was, only these people knew the art of living. Even though they had not progressed much, the life they led here was stress-free, just like it was in Vrindavan. Well, surrendering to bhaiya's wishes and Adeshwar's entreaties, we spent another eight days at this forest settlement. And in these eight days, not just Adeshwar, but his entire community became very attached to us. Every night, we would join in their singing and dancing, and bhaiya would joyfully join their drinking. Finally, on the ninth day, I managed to convince bhaiya that it was time to go, and with this, we took Adeshwar's and the entire community's permission to leave. However, no one wanted to let us go. Hearing of our decision to leave, there were tears in everybody's eyes. Despite our short stay together, the mutual affection was such that it felt as if we had been staying with each other for years. You will not believe that I was receiving the same love and affection here, that I had received in Vrindavan. Though Adeshwar was forty years old, he had become my friend. Who would wish to leave behind such loving people?

But the reality of life was that we had to leave. The most reassuring thing was that Adeshwar had requested us to let him know whenever and wherever we needed him, no matter what the circumstances were. All in all, owing to such an

emotional farewell and moving words, we could take our leave only by afternoon. About fifty men and women had come with us till the end of the settlement. I had handed over the chariot to Adeshwar, asking him to take care of it. When the situation improved, it was this chariot in which we had to return. And now, of course, we had to continue the journey ahead on foot.

And this was how another difficult journey of our life began. The passage ahead seemed very trying indeed. Once we had left the settlement, it felt as if two birds that were flying freely in the sky had suddenly lost their wings. Travelling on foot in such a dense forest was not going to be a pleasant experience at any rate. Moreover, the problem was that as we progressed deeper into the jungle, it became even denser and even more impenetrable. To tell you the truth, I had never seen such a dense forest before! You will not believe, that after some time, it was becoming difficult to even walk through the forest. Now, we had to clear our way through the undergrowth to make a path for ourselves. And soon, our hands had been pierced by countless thorns. We could constantly hear the calls of wild animals and the sound of their movements. We had kept the mace and discus ready in case any animal suddenly attacked us. Truly, I did not have any idea that our journey would be so gruelling. It was a good thing that we had only one bundle of treasure and two sets of clothes; else it would have been difficult to even climb the mountain. However, despite our meagre luggage, was the journey any easier? The main problem was that even to satiate our hunger, we had to make do only with the fruits of the forest, irrespective of whether they were ripe or raw. The only good thing was that our destination, meaning the summit of Gomanta Mountain, could be seen right in front of us. And naturally, as we approached the mountain, it appeared even more colossal. To me, it seemed as if the Gomanta Mountain, surrounded by many hills, small and big, was the king of the range. To tell you the truth, I had never seen such a huge mountain before. All in all, our experience of grazing cows and climbing the Govardhana Mountain was proving to be very useful today. Otherwise, we would have never been able to even imagine of climbing such a huge mountain, passing through such dense forests.

Actually, the treacherous path and the dense foliage were not my only difficulties; I had one more problem that I was taking along with me. Yes, you guessed it right - bhaiya! He was already troubled by the difficult terrain and over and above that, as soon as the evening set in, he would start missing his wine. You can well imagine what a trying time I must have had while dealing with him! Although I had spent many years with him and was well acquainted with his truculent and indisposed temperament, it was still troublesome.

You can gauge how dense the forest was from the fact that even during

the day, we were yearning to see a ray of sunlight. But look at our diligence! We were still clearing out our path and moving ahead. And when it was dusk, exhausted to the bone, we would climb up a large tree to rest. We would eat whatever fruits were available, and spend the night on the branches of the tree, sleeping fitfully. Truly, our nights spent in this forest were very scary. Spending even one such frightful night would have been a formidable, or rather an impossible task for the uninitiated. Sleeping even a wink was next to impossible, with the sound of the wind whooshing through the trees and the blood-curdling calls of wild animals. Leave alone sleeping, as a precautionary measure, we had to wake up even if we did fall asleep, as some dangerous animal could attack us at any time. One slip and we could find ourselves becoming the meal of some wild animal! We had to face many wild beasts during the day too. In fact, our short journey through the forest had already seen many animals become the target of bhaiya's mace. To sum it up, the journey was extremely arduous and agonising.

Finally, after trekking continuously for five days, we eventually reached the base of the Gomanta Mountain. The vastness of the mountain was astonishing and truly beyond imagination. However, we had no strength left to climb the mountain. So, finding a safe tree, we climbed on its branches and fell asleep. We were overtaken by fatigue, and besides, we were almost free from the danger of wild animals here. Feeling reassured, we slipped into such a deep slumber that we woke up only the next afternoon. Just imagine! We had managed to sleep for so long even on the branch of a tree! However, now that we had enjoyed a good night's sleep, we were full of vim and vigour. We hungrily devoured fruits and immediately began climbing the mountain. Covered by numerous trees, both big and small, this mountain also appeared densely forested. In fact, the shrubs were so thick here that it made it difficult for us to find a path ahead. Even after toiling hard till evening, we felt as if we had just taken two steps ahead! And this was not the end, but just the beginning of a series of seemingly endless difficulties. Though there was hardly any danger from wild animals on the mountain, it was teeming with all kinds of snakes. Fortunately, both bhaiya and I were adept at handling snakes. Besides, I also had the experience of killing a savage snake like the Kaaliya serpent. In fact, it was thanks only to all our old experiences that our journey progressed safely.

Even after moving to the mountain from the plains, there had been no change in our daily routine. We would climb the mountain all day long, sleep on the branches of trees when it was dusk, and resume the climb again the next day. This was not all, our troubles, instead of abating, were only growing as we moved ahead. What can I tell you? Gradually, the climb became so steep that we

had to struggle really hard to move ahead. In fact, several times we even had to hold each other's hand to climb. We also had to ensure that if one of us slipped, the other could help him regain his foothold.

After climbing for about eight days, we managed to reach the first flat surface of the mountain. Needless to say, we jumped with joy on seeing this place. We had not even imagined that there could be such a huge plain at such a height. Another good thing was that we could not see any snakes or other predatory animals over here. On the contrary, there were several nice and dense trees growing a short distance from each other. And fortunately, most of these were trees bearing fruits and flowers. Meaning, it did not seem as if we would have any food-related problems. Well, now at least, I would not have to face hungry bhaiya's ire.

All things considered, the mountain appeared habitable from every angle. And what delighted us even more was the fact that there was also a small pond on the other end of the clearing. I felt as if I had conquered both heaven and earth. After the long, arduous journey through thick forest, there was a plateau with fruit-laden trees and an enchanting pond! After all our difficulties, this mountain truly did not appear to be any less beautiful than heaven itself, and perhaps it was not. So, we decided to set up camp at this place. From the security point of view, this place was perfect. The reason was clear; if we had taken all of eight days to climb to the flat summit of this mountain after crossing such thick and dense forests, then without a doubt, no one else would be able to scale to this height in anything less than thirty-forty days. We had the experience of wandering in the forests of Vrindavan and climbing the Govardhana Mountain, which kings and their armies most certainly would not have. That is why, it is said that whatever life gives us a chance to learn, we must learn. Who knows, when something one has learnt could prove to be useful? As such, my experiences made it clear that whatever one has learnt from life invariably proves to be useful for his life. It is fake ascetics and mediocre *gurukuls* that propagate useless knowledge which has no connection with life. Whereas, life gives us opportunities to learn only those things which would prove useful in the future.

Forget all this for the time being. Right now, the important point was that we had fled from Mathura in search of a safe haven, and I could vouch that there could not have been a safer place for us than this mountain. Even if Jarasandha found out that we were up here, it would take his troops months to climb this steep mountain and reach us. This meant that we were safe for the next three or four months at least. As such, by taking refuge on this mountain, not only had the threat of Jarasandha been averted, but we had also stumbled upon a very

beautiful place. Neither was there any shortage of food and water here, nor was there any dearth of beauty. The atmosphere was so serene that I had begun to truly enjoy myself here from the first day itself. As for the place itself, it had trees spread out as far and wide as the eye could see. Towards the right-hand corner of this mountain was a lovely little pond which was a natural arrangement for our drinking water and bathing. Wherever down the mountain slope, all one could see was the dense forest all around. The place was extremely windy too. In just two days, my routine was set. Twice a day, I would roam around the mountain and pluck and eat all kinds of fruit directly from the trees. Interestingly, in addition to the peace and harmony that I was enjoying here, now there was no danger in my playing the flute either. Every evening, I would lose myself in the mellifluous strains of the flute. It would sometimes take me for a stroll in the streets of Vrindavan, and at other times, it would take me to perform the *Raasa* with Radha and the other gopis. But when my dear flute would compel me to get lost in memories of Rukmini, it would become unbearable for me! Then I would console myself with the thoughts, ‘So why are you getting so distressed about it? You haven’t stopped dreaming of Rukmini, have you? Don’t be upset! If today your life has been saved; tomorrow you may also win your love over.’ As such, this thought was nice to console myself with, but the ground reality was, what could be achieved merely with our lives being saved? In fact, the situation had deteriorated even further. I wanted to earn wealth so that I could marry Rukmini, and I wished to have my own kingdom too. But here I was, a deserter, hiding on top of this huge mountain, without a roof over my head, without utensils, or even a bed! Here, the earth was my bed and the sky, my blanket. From a place like this, dreaming of becoming eligible for Rukmini or of winning her hand was indeed nothing more than impudent audacity. At the same time, it was also true that forgetting her was impossible. In short, my evenings would be spent in thinking how far dreams were from reality. And frankly, I was ready to go through this inner turmoil, but I was not prepared to give up dreaming about Rukmini. You might very well think that if a poor cowherd boy, who did not even have a home or a refuge to call his own, and whose life itself was at the mercy of Jarasandha, dreamt of winning the hand of a princess such as Rukmini or becoming a king, then he was either insane or a foolish dreamer. But I can say with utmost certainty, that I was neither insane nor foolish, but a dreamer, and I was living with the hope that sooner or later, just like all dreamers, I too would manage to fulfill my dreams.

Now it was a different matter whether I fulfilled my dreams or not, but at this time, thanks to my flute, I was experiencing the happiness of having become the King of two worlds at once. As such, my flute had been dear to me ever

since my childhood, but it had never been so precious to me as it was now. For, at present, it was my flute alone which was my Radha, my Rukmini, my wealth and my kingdom! That is why I say, if you are fond of any art, you can happily survive even in the most adverse circumstances by taking refuge in it. However, unfortunately, in complete contrast to my state of mind, bhaiya was in a pitiable plight indeed. As soon as evening set in, he would start missing his cups of wine. Besides, art was anathema to him. Let alone art, he was not interested in even the most important activities that directly affected the quality of life. He would neither exercise, nor was he interested in going for a walk. As a result, in the evening, when he began missing his wine, he would become even more truculent, so much so, that owing to this, it was becoming difficult for my poor brother to spend his time. All day, he would keep aimlessly loitering from one tree to another and on getting exhausted, he would sit like a statue under a tree for hours. And the trouble was that his uneasiness was gradually taking the form of psychosis. Besides, this psychosis of his was now creating hurdles in my life as well. So much so, that he had once again stopped talking to me. Indeed, he attributed this trouble-filled life to my decision of fleeing from the battlefield. Well, seen from his perspective, the reason for his anger was justified too. As for me, I did not have an immediate solution to this problem. And in my opinion, what could not be resolved had to be accepted. So, ignoring bhaiya's stupidity, I continued to enjoy myself. But yes, I would frequently cast a wary, sidelong glance at bhaiya's sadness and bitterness. I could clearly see that this could not continue for long; sooner or later, bhaiya would lose his patience. It was evident that he could rebel at any moment. Truly, this was a huge problem! Bhaiya was not letting me live in peace on this mountain and Jarasandha would not spare us, if we descended the mountain! However, everything would fall into place only if we managed to stay alive. Thus, for now, it was best that I put up with the troubles caused by bhaiya.

But even though I had accepted that this was the best situation to be in, it was becoming dreadful by the day. It had been just ten days since we took refuge on this mountain, but bhaiya's disposition made it seem as if we were suffering in this manner for years! Indeed, his increasing restlessness had even compelled me to think, 'What kind of a life is this? How long can we continue living like this anyway? Well, definitely not the rest of our lives. On the other hand, it is not easy to figure out when and how the menace called Jarasandha will be obliterated. He must have reached Mathura by now. Who knows what his reaction must have been on finding that we were not there? Also, sitting cooped up over here, it is not easy to understand what his future strategy will be. Most importantly, how will any news reach us here? So, all in all, our lives had been

saved, but everything, including our lives had been engulfed by a dense shadow of darkness. It is difficult to imagine a more arduous life than this. And if bhaiya loses his patience and goes berserk, and if I have to take some wrong decision under pressure, it would mean the end of our lives!

Meaning, before something like this occurs, it is necessary to get bhaiya to enjoy staying over here.’ It was afternoon, and I was sitting under a tree pondering over all this and bhaiya was lying down under another tree a little away from me. Honestly, just by looking at the manner in which he was lying, my heart began to race. Then suddenly, a scene flashed through my mind, and I broke into a laugh. The scene had me telling bhaiya that I would teach him how to play the flute and dance, so that he would start enjoying his stay here. On hearing that, bhaiya got so enraged that beating me up, he dragged me all the way to Magadha and left me with Jarasandha and asked him to teach me how to dance! The scene I had imagined was such, that anybody would have burst out laughing. However, when I glanced at bhaiya, my laughter vanished instantly. My mind was jolted back to the current problem once again. Indeed, there should be some interests, some fun and some goals in life; else what would be the difference between a human and an animal? But the important question was, how could life be filled with zest? How could it be made a fun-filled ride? What could I do on this mountain which would breathe life back into this dreary situation? Even after constantly pondering over these questions, I could not think of anything worthwhile. Gradually, this anxiety occupied my mind to such an extent that neither did I feel like exercising, nor could I derive any pleasure from my evening stroll. I tried playing my flute, but restlessness had me in such a vice-like grip, that the flute also refused to help, as if it did not even recognise me. Perhaps, my flute too was bored with this insipid life. Neither did it invoke Radha, nor did it make Rukmini appear. Even the gopis seemed to shy away from its magic. It was understandable; for how long would anybody stay to rot in a place like this? And when nothing was of any help to me, why would sleep behave any differently? I kept tossing and turning, but sleep had abandoned me. Meaning, the day had been ruined by depressing thoughts and now, the night offered no respite either.

Well, never mind; I reasoned that since I could not sleep, I might as well analyse the situation. Lying on my back, I began to think of a way to enliven this dreary life. I began to look for ways to somehow bring back life—to bring back our lost smile! Actually, along with bhaiya, even I could not endure this drab existence any longer. In what way and for how long could I, the seeker of love, celebration and joy, live such a colourless life? So, today I again contemplated and delved deeper and deeper into the problem. I began searching for the faintest

of possibilities. Finally, my contemplation bore fruit! As it is aptly said, that if you try with all your heart, results are bound to follow! I too began to see a ray of light in this deep darkness and I jumped with joy. I could see life and celebration coming to the mountain. Now, there was no question of my going to sleep. I just had to wait for the sun to rise and bhaiya to wake up. I wanted to share my plan with him as soon as possible and make him happy. The night dragged on and on. Moreover, it was difficult to even toss and turn, with my head resting on a stone strewn with leaves. So, I got up and began loitering around. Bhaiya was lying in a regal pose on a rock nearby, having strewn it with leaves. The sun had risen, I was loitering around, but his snores continued. Finally, fed up, I started making loud sounds. My hard work paid off; bhaiya woke up with a start. Excited that I was, I immediately requested him to listen to my plan. All he had to do was trouble his ears a little. So, nodding his head, he gave me permission to speak. As soon as I got his consent, I began, "Bhaiya if you notice, this mountain is very beautiful. There is no need to fear predatory animals and we are safe here from Jarasandha as well. There is no problem as far as food and water are concerned. If there is something that this place lacks, it is life and certainly, without life everything else is worthless. Besides, fortunately, it is summer at present. But during the rainy season and winter, it will not be possible to live here without a proper house. We will have to make some arrangements for that too." It was true that bhaiya was not attentively listening to me, but it was enough for me that he was not completely ignoring me either. Also, what I was saying tallied with his own thoughts to some extent, so how could he disregard it completely? Enthused, I continued further, "Bhaiya, do you remember that ascetic had said that this mountain used to be an old, prosperous city? Going by that, there could be lots of treasure buried here. We already have the vast treasure given by Chandak lying with us, why don't we use it to bring life back to this mountain and try to hunt for the buried treasure as well? We will consider that we have invested our wealth in order to earn more wealth. Adeshwar has already become a good friend of ours. Their village always faces threats from wild animals. They too are looking for a safe haven. They can certainly not find a safer place than this mountain and that too, so close to their present settlement. So, I am thinking, why don't we ask those tribal people to come and live here with us on this mountain? This will bring life as well as festivities back here."

The very thought enthused bhaiya, for there would be regular dancing, singing and drinking right here. He had just begun dreaming, when he suddenly became despondent again, as if something had derailed his train of thought. I could not understand what the matter was and bhaiya could not hide his thoughts

from me for long. In a low voice, he asked, “Will Adeshwar and the tribal people agree to relocate to this mountain?”

I said, “Certainly! Why not? It is for their good as well.” Getting a firm assurance from me, bhaiya’s mood brightened up again. For the first time in ten days, he looked happy. Seeing him so delighted, I felt a new surge of energy and enthusiasm. Did you see how amazing the solution I found was! I was happy, bhaiya was content and the tribal people...they would obviously be thrilled! It was the perfect solution for the most difficult problem. Life would perk up for both – the tribal people’s relocation would be mutually beneficial. Instantly, I began to feel a sense of pride and thought to myself, ‘Wow, Krishna! No matter what the problem is, you seem to find a neat way out of it!’ What could I do? To be proud of myself had almost become a daily routine for me. Oh! Please don’t think that I am conceited. It is for you to decide whether I was merely as proud as a peacock or whether my actions were really praiseworthy.

These thoughts aside, we almost raced down to the forest settlement below. This time, we had to descend the mountain and not climb it. Moreover, the path was also now familiar, and we were full of enthusiasm too. So, by afternoon the next day, we reached the village. Not just Adeshwar, the entire community went wild with joy on seeing us in their midst again. And what can I say about the happiness of my innocent brother? He was impatiently waiting for evening to set in. He was already intoxicated thinking about the dance and the wine. I could clearly see that these two hobbies were gradually becoming his weaknesses. No doubt, even I was equally restless, but the reason behind my restlessness was completely different. The reason for my restlessness was that I had to ensure that I presented my grand scheme to Adeshwar in a manner that he would find acceptable. So, to get rid of this restless feeling, at the first opportunity, I took Adeshwar to a quiet corner. I discussed my proposal with him in great detail. Adeshwar was certainly a very wise and sensible person, not because he agreed to my proposal at once and without any objection, but because he was really straightforward and sensible. Agreed, I often praised people when I wanted to get something done by them; but why do you forget that I did not use these tricks with innocent and honest people. On the contrary, I go out of my way to help them. At any rate, acting shrewd is a joy only when you are dealing with wily people.

And just as I had expected, in the course of the evening celebrations, Adeshwar did demonstrate his capabilities, proving that my assessment of him was correct. He effortlessly convinced all the tribal people of my plan and got them to agree to migrate. Meanwhile, bhaiya’s ecstasy was doubled, because of the wine and also because the tribal people had agreed to move. I too was

thrilled with the outcome. For, I too could not lead a drab existence for long and waste this opportunity of a human birth that I had obtained after such difficulty. Now that the decision was made, what was the point in wasting any more time? We already had a chariot; so, early in the morning the next day, Adeshwar and I, along with a few tribal people, went to a small marketplace on the outskirts of Karvirpur. From there, we purchased the supplies needed to build houses. We also bought several tools for digging. This was not all; I also bought clothes for myself and bhaiya, so that we could once again start living like human beings. As such, I did not forget to gift some modern clothes to Adeshwar as well. After all, he was the one who was truly the prince of the hour! And since we did not lack wealth now, I could not resist buying two cows and buffaloes in addition. After all, why should a cowherd boy unnecessarily live without curd and milk? Furthermore, our purchases further fuelled the enthusiasm of all the tribal people. They all got engaged in their respective tasks with such great fervour, that they cleared out the entire village in just four days. Now, there was no need to wait for an auspicious moment to set out. A worthy task should be initiated as soon as possible, because that precisely is the auspicious moment for it. As for negative activities, there is neither an auspicious time for it, nor has Nature determined a favourable period for it.

So, early the next day, we loaded all the goods onto our shoulders and began our trek up the mountain. The young, the old, the women, the children, all of them were very enthused. Everyone carried loads on their shoulders according to their capacity. And, in spite of repeated requests by Adeshwar not to do so, bhaiya and I were also carrying heavy loads upon our shoulders. Meaning, with one hand on the horse's rein, I was guiding the chariot while my other hand held the luggage. And since bhaiya and I knew the way, we were naturally walking ahead of everyone else. Adeshwar and a few youths were also walking along with us. Thus, I, who used to lead Mathura, was now leading a caravan of two hundred tribal people. Whenever I looked over my shoulder, the huge caravan of two hundred people following each other was a sight to behold. However, due to the weight, we were now carrying and the fact that there were old people and women with us, this time it took us twelve days to reach. I need not tell you that we all were thoroughly exhausted. Well, as per the law, one does have to endure small troubles in order to attain greater comfort and joy; so, everybody had collectively endured these hardships with a smile. But the moment everyone saw the plateau and the wonderful pond on one side of it, the atmosphere was completely transformed. Everybody's fatigue evaporated instantly due to sheer delight. Besides, the pristine beauty of the mountain had also captivated everyone's heart. Consequently, nobody bothered to rest and all of them began to

wander around. Everyone wanted to imprint the beauty of the mountain in their hearts at one glance. And what should I say about bhaiya? He was jumping with joy, showing every nook and corner of the mountain to everyone. Not just this, he had even gathered a lot of fruits with the help of the young boys. Indeed, for this evening's celebration, everyone satiated themselves with the fruits. Needless to say, everyone also sought comfortable places for themselves and went to sleep early. Seeing two hundred people, sleeping on the stones and grass together, was a wonderful sight.

However, most of the people got up only by afternoon the next day. This day was not very different from the previous one. Everybody was refreshed by now. I wanted to get the settlement established as soon as possible. So, from the very next day, I got everyone engaged in this task. Of course, I had taken charge of this entire operation. After all, I had sufficient experience in building settlements and besides, I was also more eager than anybody else to see this mountain start buzzing with life as swiftly as possible. And as they say, 'self-interest is the highest virtue', so first and foremost, I taught two of the tribal women to bathe the cows, milk them and then prepare curd and butter from the milk. For, this *Gopala* (cowherd) could not accomplish great tasks on an empty stomach. To take care of the rest of the work, I made groups of men and women. In the first group, I designated ten men and twenty women who had to dig out stones and mud. The second group was bigger, comprising thirty men and as many women; and they were assigned the task of building the houses with the stones and mud. I had also drawn up the blueprint of the settlement in my mind. While drafting the blueprint, I had especially taken Vrindavan, Vaivasvatpur and *Acharya Sandipani's ashram* as my benchmarks. I avoided including Mathura because I did not like its town-planning at all. I also kept a large space close to the pond and adjacent to the settlement vacant, where there would be no construction. You guessed it right! This place was reserved for festivities or an assembly ground. Well, now that everyone was here, there was no need for us to wait to organise festivities till work on this ground was completed. That was because without festivities and the odd celebrations, work becomes burdensome. And as soon as merry celebrations are added to work, it begins to appear as a sacred duty.

Well, in all, fifteen homes were being constructed for the tribal people. And these were to be positioned along the two sides of the mountain. Our house was being constructed opposite the pond and it was planned to be a little bigger than the others. It was being built on the lines of Nanda's home in Vrindavan. You know how much I loved that house and how much I missed those houses and lovely lanes. But, I had not forgotten my duty while fulfilling my dreams. I

was getting the biggest house built for Adeshwar himself. But among all these things, what made me really happy was that everyone was completely absorbed in their tasks. Everybody's enthusiasm was worth witnessing. I too was enthusiastically absorbed in giving directions for the construction of the houses and the festival ground. Now I did not have any means to write all this, and even if I had, I really would have had no use for them. For, I did not really have any professional training in the construction of houses. All I was doing was drawing a few stray lines on the ground and impressing the tribal people. Amusingly, I would sit all day long on a big stone with three-four big sticks. Considering me to be the epitome of wisdom, the poor tribal people would keep queuing up throughout the day with their teams to understand what needed to be done next. A little puffed up, I too would draw some lines on the ground and assign them their next task. I was really enjoying this work. Honestly speaking, it was giving me all the joy of being a leader.

Thus, you can gauge everyone's diligence at work by the fact that the first bit of good news knocked on our doors just a week later. The work on the kitchen being put together near the pond was completed. There was no dearth of stones and mud over here; that was all that was lying everywhere. With the kitchen ready, everybody's enthusiasm increased exponentially. Actually, these forest dwellers did not have the tradition of cooking separately in their respective homes. And to tell you the truth, I too was greatly impressed by this tradition of community meals. And now, along with their food, I had made arrangements for our food as well. A team of four men was permanently assigned to pick fruits and firewood, and two women were engaged in making curd and butter. At any rate, I considered food as one of the few refined interests of human life.

Well, in any case, let me return to discussing the progress of the various tasks at hand. A team of men had made a number of torches by now. And as a result, the entire dining area and the festival grounds were lit up and shone at night. Truly, on such a high mountain, it was a sight to behold! These torches lit up on the summit of the mountain completely enchanted me. In fact, joys of this kind were gradually becoming a part of my life. I remember being similarly captivated when I first had my *Chhappan Bhog*. In fact, I was similarly ecstatic when I first set sight on the marketplace of Mathura. And yes, I had experienced the same thrill when I had taken the reins of the chariot in my hands for the first time, and also when I had first set my eyes on Rukmini... But let us leave that aside for now. This wasn't the time to think about all this! Let me rather narrate one interesting incident to you. Isn't it said that man invariably finds what interests him? Just as I had arranged for my curd and butter, the tribal people had also made arrangements for their liquor. Apparently, there were a number of

trees of *Varuna* – the three-leaved caper, in the forests here. And within a few days, the tribal people started making wine from its juice which was called *Varuni*. Enthused by this, Adeshwar had himself assigned four men to this task. With this, along with everyone else, bhaiya's needs were also well taken care of. Now there were no cowherd boys going hungry or thirsty on this mountain; everybody was content. Actually, executing a task becomes enjoyable only when there are content people around you. In fact, only those who are content can be made to work.

Well, now the mountain was buzzing with life. There was hard work being done all day and the nights were bright with festivities. Speaking of celebration, the burning torches had added a touch of magic to the twilight festivities, and I had been transported back to Vrindavan without even going there. And the entire credit for my being so happy had to be given to the forest dwellers, whose love was no less than the love showered on me by the inhabitants of Vrindavan. And now that I was comparing this settlement with Vrindavan, I thought, why not go right ahead and make a full study of it? Thanks to the abundant vegetation on this mountain, there was no need to go very far to pluck fruits, nor was there any need to fear wild animals. And in this respect, the living conditions here were far superior in comparison to Vrindavan. Now, tell me, was it wrong to congratulate myself for this magnificent task? If I did not, it would be an injustice to me. And if I did, you will blame me for continually patting myself on the back. Whether I did so or not, you will have to admit that just a few days earlier, this mountain was as silent as death itself. And now, right in front of our eyes, this place had come alive to such an extent that even great kings would have become envious on witnessing it. What can I say? Whether I wanted to or not, I invariably achieved such feats that made me proud of myself. Why just me, even you would have been proud of me and would have spontaneously declared: “Wow, Krishna! What a great *Karmaveer*— *a man of action* you are!”

Nevertheless, coming back to the present, the happiest person on the mountain was, of course, bhaiya. Now, you all know how much his happiness meant to me. But there was also a sad aspect to it which was fast becoming evident. The fact was, bhaiya was gradually becoming addicted to dancing, festivals and drinks.²⁶ Not only that, with the passage of time, these addictions were taking a turn for the worse. He had now begun drinking in the day as well. Along with that, I do not know what had come over him, but he had now even started hobnobbing with the tribal women. All his life, women had been anathema to him. But now, it was the demand of his age; and the wine and the

atmosphere of this place had only fuelled this desire of his. In a way, it was good that bhaiya was now getting along with women; but considering the place and the circumstances under which his love was blooming, it could certainly not be regarded as a good sign. I strongly believed that there was no deed that was good or bad in itself, and whether it was wrong or right entirely depended on the time and circumstances when it was performed. From this perspective, the roses of love blooming in bhaiya's heart could only be described as ill-timed.

Well, after a month of hard work, the construction work was finally over. For certain, the entire credit for it went to the diligence of the tribal people. They had completed several weeks' work in a matter of days. Actually speaking, it was not as if we had to make any palaces over here; all that needed to be constructed were walls of mud and stone which would protect us from the wind and the rain. Anyway, once the village was established, the tribal people, including Aadeshwar, were happy beyond description. Even I was overjoyed. We could barely contain our enthusiasm and exultation. The scene was quite enchanting; a small settlement of fifteen-seventeen houses surrounded by lush greenery as far as the eyes could see! Truly, what is destiny? Nothing! It was action which really mattered. This is why I had never accepted any adversity that came my way as my destiny, but instead, I fought it away with my *karma*. This is why I always say that I was, am and will always remain a man of action. Why just me, every person must become a *karmaveer*, otherwise he will cease to exist. If he wants to live happily and peacefully in this world, he has to redeem himself. Apart from a man's own intelligence and actions, there is nothing in this world which will come to his aid.

Well, let me stop flaunting my knowledge and come back to the settlement. Once the village was built, a new change came over all the tribal people including Aadeshwar. Their love got transformed into reverence. This expression of veneration was something new for me. Frankly speaking, their feelings for me were fuelling my ego. I had been receiving love and respect since childhood, but this veneration seemed to be dangerous. Because of this, I now had to unnecessarily expend all my energy to keep my runaway arrogance in check. I had never worshipped anyone so far, and I did not want anyone to worship me. All I wanted was for people to respect me and learn from me.

Oh well, forget it. Coming back to the settlement, its natural, earthy colours of stone and mud really made it look very beautiful. Spread across the entire plateau so high up on the mountain, with the open ground right in front of it, the look of the settlement was enough to remind me of Vrindavan. However, the sparkling pond close by, and the mountains and forest surrounding it placed it quite a few notches higher than Vrindavan in terms of beauty. I felt as if I had

reached the pinnacle of grandeur. Moreover, the regular evening festivities made this mountain an enchanting place. I could not praise this settlement enough. Truly, this settlement had infused so much life into the mountain that it seemed to be coming alive with joy. On the other hand, bhaiya, Adeshwar and the rest of the tribal men had turned into inebriated white elephants. It was inevitable, for, after all, there could neither be a more beautiful atmosphere to live in than this, nor could there be any other place as safe as this. Just a month earlier, this mountain seemed like the playground of death and today, heaven-like life had descended on it. Just think, what can man not achieve if he uses his intelligence, willpower and diligence?

To digress a little from the topic, I too was very pleased, but I was not intoxicated at all, because for me, the task had just begun. Life had stabilised, but I still had to make it secure and enhance it. And this would be possible only if I prepared this mountain for a war against Jarasandha. Certainly, this was a difficult task. There was Jarasandha's large, well-trained army, equipped with the latest weapons and here I was, stuck with a handful of tribal people. Now you must have realised why I was not intoxicated. Ordinarily, when a person gets intoxicated, he throws caution to the winds, but remaining cautious was an integral part of my personality. Admittedly, the mountain was very safe, and there was no immediate threat from Jarasandha; but the fact was, the threat had not been totally averted yet. How could I turn a blind eye to the fact that sooner or later, Jarasandha would definitely charge up the mountain in the form of death? I needed to be commended for keeping this fact at the back of my mind. You will not believe it, even when I was busy building the settlement, my mind kept pondering over how to get rid of Jarasandha. After all, death or Jarasandha were not going to take my permission to arrive, and ask me, "Krishna, if you are ready, shall we come?" I had also discerned that my next battle with Jarasandha would take place nowhere else but on this very mountain. For, sooner or later, he was bound to arrive here searching for us. It was also certain that we could not leave this mountain and flee somewhere else. We had constantly been on the run till we had reached here. Where else could we go now? So, just as there was no option other than a battle with Jarasandha—which I had to fight whether I liked it or not—I had no other option than to keep thinking of a strategy for this inevitable battle. Whether I liked it or not, my thoughts kept on revolving around it. All said and done, I could see just two possibilities on this mountain in the future; either we would be killed or we would have to repulse Jarasandha's army by launching a counter-attack. Naturally, my attention was fixed on the second possibility.

Finally, one day, my deliberation bore fruit. I devised a battle strategy

which was perhaps not enough to defeat Jarasandha, but it could certainly succeed in harassing him and compelling him to flee. And what more did I want? Our lives would be spared if he fled. After being harassed a couple of times, Jarasandha would certainly forget about me and get involved in something else. This very thought energised me and that too to such an extent, that I immediately began implementing it. First and foremost, I got ten well-built men to collect small, medium-sized and giant boulders from all around and strategically arrange them on all sides of the mountain. This exercise took about ten days to complete. After that, I got them stacked in a sequence. Nearest the border were the smallest stones, then came the medium-sized ones, which were followed by the giant boulders. Now you might think, ‘Krishna had lost his mind. What was he planning to do with all these boulders? Was he dreaming of defeating Jarasandha’s army with a bunch of stones?!’ Alright then, pay attention to what I am saying. The one who makes optimum use of whatever material is available in the hope of winning is a wise person; not the one who gives an excuse of lacking the means. This approach not only applies to war, but to all struggles of life. Now that we are discussing this topic, let me reveal one more secret to you. It is solely owing to this formula that Krishna is now hailed with cries of *Jai Shri Krishna* (Victory to Krishna)! Actually, the funny thing was that just like you, neither Adeshwar, nor the other tribal people could understand what these boulders would do. But the good thing was, that for them, the objective did not matter; my command alone was enough. Whatever the reason, right now, with this done, a very important task of mine had been completed. Because from the security viewpoint, there was nothing more that I could do right now. And it was not as if Jarasandha was going to attack right away. What I mean to say is that the first obstacle in his path had been put in place. There was nothing more to do or think about on this front. It was not possible for weapons or an army to spring up on the mountain overnight. I had to sustain my courage only by using resources that were available. Thus, once these preparations were completed, I pushed thoughts of Jarasandha to the back of my mind.

No sooner had I done that than my mind went back to my meeting with the ascetic Parshuram. Had he not said that a very prosperous city lay buried on this mountain?²⁷ Just see, I had forgotten such an important thing, thanks to thinking about Jarasandha. But now that I had remembered, what was the point in waiting? I thought, why not start looking for the treasure right away? At any rate, I had understood what the great saint Parshuram had told me—that I should become my own refuge; and for that, he had advised me to increase both my wealth and power. Therefore, I did not want to miss this opportunity under any

circumstances. Now, I do not wish to hide anything from you. I certainly did not want to die as an ordinary cowherd boy. I wanted to scale many peaks of grandeur. You can say that I wanted all this to win over my dear Rukmini. In view of this, as well as other things, it had now become imperative for me, Krishna—the *Karmaveer*, to find this treasure as soon as possible. The question now was of taking Adeshwar into confidence. As such, he had become my acolyte, but still, I needed to get everything confirmed. So, at the time of the evening festivities, when the entire ground was glowing with the light of the torches and everyone was singing and dancing, I caught hold of him and took him to the far end of the pond. That is to say, I just took him away from the sound. From this distance, the settlement and everyone singing and dancing appeared even more beautiful. Nevertheless, I openly told him about a prosperous city being buried underneath. Upon hearing of it, he was delighted and immediately promised me that all the tribal people would be available to assist me. I had promised Adeshwar a share in the find. But in fact, he seemed to be hungrier for my love than for the treasure. It was this simplicity of his which captured my heart. On the way back, we went back to the ground in a flash. The singing and dancing were still going strong and there were numerous rounds of drinks as well. Bhaiya was enjoying his drink near the lakeside with a band of young tribal men. As soon as we were back, Adeshwar made me sit on a big rock near the kitchen. He himself stood next to me and clapped loudly. As soon as he clapped, the singing and dancing stopped abruptly. Then he informed everyone about the treasure in detail. Hearing this, a new wave of enthusiasm coursed through the assembled crowd. Then the singing, dancing and drinking began with such zest that it stopped only in the wee hours. On that day, even Adeshwar and I were surrounded and made to dance. This not only gave me an excuse to indulge in my hobby of dancing, but everyone's enthusiasm also convinced me—the dreamer, that I would soon be rich. Well, by afternoon the next day, we also held a meeting at the festival ground.

Naturally, I wanted to begin hunting for the treasure without wasting any time. Thus, needless to add, I took charge of this operation. First of all, I divided all the tribal people into two teams. I personally led one team while Adeshwar led the other. Furthermore, it was decided that both the teams will start working from the next day itself. We had also piled up all the materials required for the excavation on the ground by that very evening. Seeing everyone's enthusiasm, I was on cloud nine. Perhaps, everybody had realised that if there was indeed a prosperous city hidden beneath this mountain, then the possibility of finding an enormous treasure could not be ruled out. However, bhaiya's conspicuous absence even during the execution of such an important task had me worried. He

was the only one among the youth who did not take an interest in anything. He was busy enjoying himself with his friends, the tribal women, in the settlement. And to tell you the truth, bhaiya's ill-timed amorous adventures had today become a major cause of concern for me. For, I knew that if there arose some misunderstanding owing to bhaiya's antics, all would be lost. We were completely dependent on these tribal people on this lonely mountainside. Such being the case, if Adeshwar or someone else got even slightly disconcerted about something, or if there was even a hint of acrimony between us then we would once again be in deep trouble. I was worried for the fact that, what if bhaiya's bubble of love, which had risen at the wrong time and in the wrong place, destroyed our lives?

Frankly, instead of focussing on the thousands of tasks which lay ahead, I was now caught up in worrying about bhaiya. I wonder why man thinks of everything at the wrong time. In both Vrindavan and Mathura, the time and the place was right for love. I do not know why bhaiya never got along with the gopis then. Remember, one is always in one's senses when doing things at the right time, but if something is done at an inappropriate time, it is a sign of being unaware. In other words, man is unaware, and that is why, he does the wrong things at the wrong time. This was what I had asked Arjuna in the Gita, "*Why have you been gripped by this ill-timed attachment?*"²⁸ All through his life, Arjuna had never thought of renunciation, for which any time would have been appropriate. He thought of it only on the battlefield. Tell me, standing in the battlefield, what was this sudden desire to renounce life, if not fear? Similarly, in my opinion, ill-timed love is not love but merely, lust. Thus, to put it very candidly, bhaiya, at present, was a victim of lust. Of course, I did not have any intention of picking a quarrel with bhaiya. On the contrary, I was prepared to lay down my life for his happiness any day. But his ill-timed mischief could prove to be dangerous, not only for us, but for everyone. In short, it was necessary to rein him in for now. I mustered my courage and decided to have a word with him. So as soon as the meeting ended, I caught hold of him. I explained to him that these tribal people were our only support now and if there was even a hint of some misunderstanding between us, our lives would again become like a living hell. Therefore, it was best that he stayed away from the tribal women.

Now, my concern was genuine, but I do not know why bhaiya took umbrage at it; he became incensed. Perhaps he was slightly drunk and I suppose I was spoiling his fun. Consequently, he directed his fury at me and almost scolding me, he said, "You are instructing me? What will you, the one who loitered with the gopis of Vrindavan day and night, and the one who used to

spend all his time with Malini in Mathura, teach me?! You better keep your preaching to yourself!”

Hearing this, even I got angry. I could not help it, and for the first time in my life, I spoke to him in a loud and angry voice. I said, “Why are you talking about me? Even the pleasures I indulge in are a form of devotion. Mark my words, bhaiya, if wine and lust take control of a person, he gets lost in darkness.”

But bhaiya was bhaiya after all. He was not one to be subdued by my loud and angry voice. On the contrary, he became even more furious. Flushed with fury, he shot back, “Affliction, enjoyment, devotion! Keep your fancy ideologies and big words to yourself! Don’t you dare trap me in words! Your tricks are not going to work with me!”

That was the end of the matter. I realised that there was no use trying to advise bhaiya at this time. I gave up and quietly stomped back. What else could I do? Bhaiya could do as he wished. I would deal with the consequences when I had to. Issues which cannot be resolved are best left to Nature’s justice. I had far too many other matters to attend to right now. So, I quietly walked away from there. Surprisingly, after this, bhaiya maintained his distance from me even during the evening festivity. It did not matter! For on this day, the celebration winded up early, as everyone had to start work early the next morning.

The next morning, everyone had assembled on the ground well on time. Spades, pickaxes and big rods of iron were already at the festive ground. Around fifty of us had set off with the equipment. I was carrying a pickaxe on my shoulder while Adeshwar was walking alongside me with a spade. Behind us, about fifty women and men came walking. We reached the tip of the mountain, and my team got engaged in work from one end while Adeshwar’s group began working from the other. We were feverishly digging up the mountain. Everybody’s enthusiasm had to be seen to be believed. We continued digging until we got tired, and in the evening, we returned home. From the next day onwards, this became our daily routine. In the morning, we would eat something and then set off in our search. We would toil hard throughout the day and return to the settlement only by evening, where the tribal women would be waiting for us with freshly cooked food. We would have dinner, dance and sing for a while and then go to sleep. The next day, we would again set off after breakfast. But unfortunately, even after ten days of continual digging, we found nothing. Let alone the ancient township, we couldn’t even find traces of its ruins. Naturally, after a while, everybody’s enthusiasm began to wane. Now, everybody had started to believe that the existence of an advanced, wealthy township on the mountain was just a fable. Well, quite often, such well-known stories are nothing more than myths. But still, I wanted to put in my best effort. As I was

enthusiastic by nature, I was not disappointed. Besides, there was no other important work to be done on this mountain that would compel us to lose hope and stop the treasure hunt. Take me for example; I knew that Jarasandha could come anytime and pounce on this mountain in the form of death. But did it mean that driven by fear, I should give up the hope of living? Thinking about the possibility of death, I cannot give up hopes of a good life and stop making attempts towards that goal. I believed that no matter how much darkness there is in one's life, not only should one keep hoping for light, but one should also keep striving to bring it back into one's life. Thus, I encouraged everybody and got them to resume their digging with twice the enthusiasm. Along with that, I also modified the search strategy a little. This time, I formed ten teams of five diggers each and spread them all across the mountain. All of them were instructed to inform me the moment they found anything. After all, how was it possible to shirk action in Krishna's presence?

The new search strategy gave rich dividends, for, on the very third day, one of the teams reported a startling find! Indeed, positive thinking invariably brings positive results! I was busy digging with my team near the tip of the mountain, when one of the teams of tribal people came there excited to give me this news. Some remnants of the ancient town were discovered at the rear end of our settlement. I jumped with joy as soon as I heard the news and raced off with them. Indeed, there were remains of a township here. And even as we were expressing our elation on seeing this, another team came running. They also seemed to be ecstatic beyond description. And why would they not be? They too had found remnants of a township near the other incline of the mountain. Very excited, I ran to the other spot too, and sure enough, there were signs of an ancient town there too. This decided my future course of action. This time, instead of the evening celebration, I held a meeting with everyone. Two things were decided at the meeting. One, we would set off early in the morning and two, we would continue digging on only those two sites now. So, from the next day onwards, we put all our strength into working on those two sites. I enthusiastically joined the digging at the rear end of the mountain. Under Adeshwar's leadership, the digging at the tip of the mountain had also started in earnest. With the discovery of the ancient town's remnants, everyone was feeling zestful once again. Based on this fresh experience, I realised that nothing else in this world can give rise to such enthusiasm as success. But remember, success is attained only by those who can sustain their enthusiasm even in moments of despair. In my opinion, a person who is filled with enthusiasm even when caught in a whirlpool of constant failures, is the only one who deserves success. And who else could know this better than me? After all, I had been shadowed by

despair all my life. You know that my birth itself had taken place in a dark dungeon. What I mean to say is, thanks to Nature, there was no lack of darkness in my life. But because of my tenacity and personal attributes, I was always able to bring light into this darkness. I am telling you in all earnestness that life is just another name for vigorous action and wholeheartedly enjoying oneself whenever one gets the opportunity. There is no third purpose of life.

Oh well, let me save the philosophy for another time and return to talking about my present endeavour which I was diligently pursuing. After continued digging for three days, we unearthed some rusted, useless weapons. Indeed, this discovery was indubitable proof that a town was really buried here. Our goal seemed to be close at hand; not just me, but everyone was wild with enthusiasm. We just had to dig for a few days, and we would find the treasure! This feeling of exhilaration pervaded the evening festivities as well. I could clearly see the dreams in everyone's eyes. But these simple people were no match for my imagination! I was the expert in the art of dreaming. In my mind, I had already become rich and had even managed to impress Rukmini. But with Nature around, how could I ever accomplish anything so easily? Just when we were about to accomplish our mission, there were signs that our dreams might be shattered. Nature had already vowed to put one obstacle in my path after another, and it did not fail this time either. However, it is also true that I had never held any grudge against it. On the contrary, I had always taken it as a game between the two of us. It continued to test my resolve of being a man of action, and I always rose to the challenge and moved ahead.

Speaking of Nature, one night, one of its greatest marvels took us by surprise. All of a sudden, there was heavy rainfall accompanied by thunder, heralding the arrival of monsoon. At that time, I was lying down in my room, dreaming of relaxing on a swing with Rukmini. The sound of the thunder not only disrupted my dream, but brought me out of my slumber as well. I quickly rushed outside and was dumbstruck on seeing such torrential rain. Now, you all know how difficult it becomes to dig in the monsoon. So, forgetting all my dreams, I returned to reality and sat brooding in the veranda all night, watching the furious downpour.

Well, even this dark, stormy night came to an end, followed by the sliver of light that heralded the next morning; but this made no difference to the fierce downpour. Regardless, I reached the ground well on time after finishing off my morning chores. Nobody had arrived there so far. Well, even that did not matter; I sat down beneath a tree and began to enjoy getting drenched in the rains. After quite some time, Adeshwar arrived accompanied by three to four other men. Then gradually, around twenty people reached there. But everyone had come just

because they had to. None of them seemed to be eager to continue digging. Now, whether they were excited or not, I could not let my dreams be shattered. And besides, there was no question of Krishna turning his back on action. I pepped up those who had come and set off with them to resume digging. Unbelievably, just a single downpour had ruined all our earlier efforts. Firstly, we had set off late, and secondly, the slush had reduced our speed even further. By the time we reached our excavation spot, half the afternoon had elapsed. Really, we had to walk with utmost care. After a point, the mud had become so wet and slippery that we faced the danger of losing our footing from a height. In short, it was already difficult to dig on this mountain even under ordinary circumstances, and now, because of the greasiness of the mud, our life itself was in danger. Hence, we returned to the settlement with long faces, without doing any further excavation on the site.

Well, since it was the first day of rains, what had happened this morning was understandable, but this could not happen every day. Now that the monsoon season had begun, it would continue to rain. Meaning, our task would only become increasingly difficult by the day. We could not wait for four months for the monsoon to subside. Did we have that much time? Don't you remember? By the end of monsoon, there was every possibility of the menace called Jarasandha descending upon us. In short, there was no alternative but to keep digging despite these difficult circumstances. And I would have to take the lead in this matter too. Thus, I assembled everyone once again that night, and delivered a veritable speech. I told them how beautiful their life could become in the future. As a result, the next morning, everyone assembled at the ground, full of enthusiasm and that too, well before time. So, I administered them one more dose of enthusiasm and somehow ensured that the digging operation resumed. Because of the rains, the digging was certainly not as fast as it was earlier, but yes, it had at least begun. It is said that anything done wholeheartedly invariably yields the desired results. And this was precisely what happened. In the next seven days, despite the rains, the outcome was extremely encouraging. Gold, silver, jewellery studded with diamonds, and other precious stones were uncovered. With the discovery of this treasure, everybody's enthusiasm automatically soared to the skies. Now there was no need for me to make any effort to inspire them. Now, nobody saw the rains, the greasy mud and the threat to life and property as hurdles anymore.

Thus, the tribal people got engaged in action, but as soon as we began finding the treasure, I strayed from the path of action. To tell you the truth, as soon as we found the treasure, I lost my mind completely, and began to see Rukmini's face in diamonds and pearls. I slipped into a romantic mood. And

why would I not? Why else do you think I was looking for treasure in the first place? It was only to become worthy of her that I had readily endured so much trouble. And just see, how boxes upon boxes of treasure were being found. In no time, there was a shower of wealth on the mountain. Needless to add, insane with joy as I was, I began to see my dream getting closer to fulfillment with every box that was found. However, let me tell you one thing; I had certainly lost my mind in sheer delight, but I had not strayed from my duty or political strategy. I made sure that all the treasure chests were kept safely in Adeshwar's house, so that the forest dwellers believed that it was their wealth, and their enthusiasm remained intact. Of course, they did have a legitimate share in it. Well, after about twenty days of digging, we had managed to dig out a sizeable amount of treasure. At any rate, digging anymore was not possible. Strong winds and heavy rain had made the excavation nearly impossible. I too cast greed aside and decided to stop the digging immediately. Indeed, the quantity of treasure that we had found was by no standards small; at least for a cowherd boy, it was more than enough! So, instead of risking the lives of the villagers, I thought it wise to be content with what we had found.

Needless to add, everyone was ecstatic on finding such a huge treasure. Still, my happiness was beyond comparison. In my heart of hearts, I was jumping with joy. Overnight, I, a poor cowherd boy had become extremely rich, and now, my eyes were full of dreams. But the menace called Jarasandha invariably made his euphoria vanish into thin air. The threat from him was not even letting me dream properly. Really, once this menace was done away with, my life would be transformed. But how could it be averted? It was not a small threat; it was greater than a thousand threats put together. It was certainly not something that could be easily warded off. But what else could I do, except *karma*? And I was honestly doing just that. Sooner or later, Jarasandha's attack was inevitable. I already knew it was impossible to stay hidden for long from Jarasandha's spy network and his allies. Sooner or later, he would surely come knocking at my door.

But if we forget about Jarasandha for a moment and look at this mountain, what did it lack? It was such a beautiful place with such fine weather, sumptuous food and daily festivities. And on top of all this, it was the monsoon season which, you know, was my most favourite. So, somehow consoling myself and pushing the menace called Jarasandha out of my mind, I focussed my attention on enjoying the rains! I could not play my flute for fear of being recognised, so I contented myself with wandering around the mountain and enjoying getting drenched in the rain, or, I would sit for hours on some big rock and gaze into the distance. Since we were on the summit of the mountain, we

were always enveloped by clouds. On top of it, the joy of gazing at the dense forest all around us while it rained was indescribable. Now, who wanted to sit and brood about Jarasandha in such lovely weather? So, I was wandering about happily. As for bhaiya, he had found a unique way to enjoy the monsoon. He would start drinking right from early morning with a few of his companions. Right from childhood, he had been stouter than me. And now, due to his regular drinking and no fixed exercise regimen, he had put on twice my weight. In short, my handsome bhaiya had started looking ungainly. But I did not want to invite his wrath by telling him anything right now. Actually, even I was quite fat since my childhood. But thanks to regular exercise and a balanced diet, I was becoming very athletic and attractive with age.

Nevertheless, let me stop this condescending comparison, and come to what was transpiring over here; the heavy rain had washed away all my worries about Jarasandha, at least for the time being. He was not so insane that he would set off in the midst of such torrential rains to hunt me out. Still, he was Jarasandha, after all. You never know what he might do in his frenzy; he might just attack. Thus, even though it was merely a precautionary measure, I felt it necessary to prepare Adeshwar for a possible war. However, I could not reveal to him that Jarasandha was my arch-enemy and he might attack me any time. For, if I told him that, then Adeshwar and the rest of the tribal people might decide that this was my personal matter and would not be inclined to fight with all their might. In short, I had to talk to him in an indirect manner; meaning, I had to spin a yarn. And that was not a difficult task for me! So, I cooked up a story and narrated it to Adeshwar. Cautioning him, I told him that it was a well-known fact that wherever there is treasure, thieves do come sooner or later. Therefore, I told him that we need to be prepared to face such bandits. Now, when Krishna plays a trick, how was it possible for anyone to not fall for it? Besides, who would want to lose such fabulous treasure which had been acquired with such great difficulty? Adeshwar was bound to take the bait. He promptly convened a meeting and cautioned all the tribal people to beware of thieves who could steal the treasure. This was precisely what I wanted. My task had now become easy. Under Adeshwar's leadership, the entire army of tribal people was ready to fight. And why would they not fight? After all, this was now their personal war. The shadow of bandits loomed over their hard-earned treasure. All this was necessary indeed, but Adeshwar needed to be praised for one thing. He never asserted his right over the treasure, even though I had repeatedly told him that he and his tribe had as much right to it as we ourselves had. And this simplicity of his was very touching. Besides, practically speaking, even if we had got the opportunity, we would not have been able to take all the treasure with us. Keeping this in

mind, I had already got two big chests separately filled with invaluable diamonds and pearls and other priceless jewellery and had kept them aside at the initial stage itself. Well, there was no likelihood of our spending our entire lives on this mountain! Either Jarasandha would kill us, or he would get fed up and abandon the fight. If he retreated, we would enjoy our wealth, and if he killed us, he would take the treasure along with him.

Just see, how wonderful my planning was! I had thought things through to the extent of taking the treasure with us. Not only that, I had even got it filled in two big boxes and had them placed in our chamber, as if we were just about to leave! Well, this bit of optimism is necessary in life. But taking a step ahead, I had now even started contemplating about the arrangements for taking the treasure along with us. And in this regard, the first thing that needed to be considered was that both of us, as well as the treasure, would have to travel by chariot; and we had just one chariot. To me, it did not seem likely that both of us, and the treasure, could be accommodated in a single chariot. And since it was a question of treasure, it was necessary that I immediately took the required action, call it optimism or height of foolishness! Thus, along with Adeshwar, I immediately set off for Karvirpur and purchased another chariot. However, not only did we have to face extreme hardship to get the chariot to the top of the mountain considering the rains and dense forest, but this entire activity also took a whole fifteen days. So, what? Was it possible to obtain such a priceless treasure without any hardship? To tell you the truth, only now did I feel that all my tasks had been taken care of. The treasure had been found, and it had also been filled in boxes. On the other hand, under Adeshwar's leadership, I had also got the tribal people ready for the impending war. And now, the chariots too were ready for us to flee if the situation demanded.

Now, when all the tasks were completed, the appetite for enjoyment also increased exponentially. Besides, I was a fun-loving person anyway. The mountain range was indeed quite breathtaking, there was greenery as far as the eyes could see, and on top of it all, it was the rainy season. As if this was not enough, there were the daily celebrations amidst an atmosphere of enthusiasm and zeal. There was no dearth of love or food. There were neither adversities nor struggles; I was absolutely ecstatic. And what can I say about my state of mind? Pleasure, fun, life, peace, all reached their zenith. Truly, there is a different joy altogether when one is free of worries and anxieties! This was precisely what I was experiencing at this moment. Truly, the joy of becoming free after having done one's duty is beyond comparison! This joy can neither be derived nor can it be understood by those who shirk their duty. You will not believe it, but I was so overjoyed, that I even began to dance with the tribal people. The beautiful

mountain and the daily celebrations had compelled me to get lost in the memories of Vrindavan once again. In my flights of fancy, I wished that my mother, Radha, the gopas and gopis too were here with me. If that were to really happen, and somehow the danger from Jarasandha could be averted, then I would never leave this mountain! I would settle here forever.

But how could there be so much happiness and peace in my life, and that too, with Nature around? Impossible! Sometimes, I would wonder whether Nature had anything better to do than to keep sending me troubles and struggles! Anyway, the monsoon elapsed as we celebrated and cavorted around happily, but once the season ended, the situation was back to what it had been before. The rains washed away the boulders that I had got stacked for security, and this once again underlined the harsh reality of the threat from Jarasandha. Once again, my mind was caught up in anxiety. On one hand, I was overwhelmed with happiness on obtaining the treasure, while I yearned to attain Rukmini, and on the other, I was worried if I would ever survive long enough to savour this pleasure, thanks to death in the form of Jarasandha that was close on my heels. Meaning, my life was at such a crossroad, that both the eventualities seemed equally possible in spite of being diametrically opposite to each other. There was the possibility of Jarasandha eliminating me and my life coming to an end; but if I survived, there was also the opportunity to live life to its fullest. And trapped between these two probabilities, finding a way to live in the present was certainly no less difficult. But the reality was that the future had to take birth from the present alone. This meant that if I could find a cure for this disease called Jarasandha right now, then everything would be all right. But how could I save myself from this menace? After all, we did not have any means to tackle him. Well, no matter what the current situation was, it was better to prepare myself for a confrontation with him rather than just wait for him to attack. So as soon as the monsoons ended, I became active. While everyone was immersed in fun and celebrations, I would try to find solitude and would remain lost in deliberations. But no matter how deeply I pondered over this problem, the reality was, that in the name of weapons, all we had on this mountain were boulders; and even they were washed away by the rain! It had become an extremely tedious task to put them back in place again. For, the rains had washed away not only the boulders that we had stacked, but most of the other stones and boulders on the mountain as well. This meant that we would first have to find the boulders and then restack them. And this was not the only problem we would face. The grass on the mountain had also grown very dense because of which finding the stones did not seem to be an easy task. However, there was also a clear advantage in this. The lush undergrowth was bound to make Jarasandha's army struggle a lot. And as for us,

we hardly had any problems. We, the cowherd boys and our friends, the tribal people, were anyway hard-working by nature. So, we immediately got engaged in some hard labour. It took us eight to ten days to locate the boulders and another three to four days to stack them. So, the situation was back to what it was. As for the war strategy, it was the same - exhaust Jarasandha and compel him to flee. I had to somehow drain that scoundrel's energy to such an extent that he would be forced to return empty-handed. Now, according to that strategy, we had already stacked the boulders and stones to create hurdles. The second obstruction had been created by the rains themselves, in the form of the dense undergrowth. It would ensure that Jarasandha's army would take at least a month to climb up the mountain. It was also certain that without climbing, he could not reach us. And it was even more certain that we would never go up to him in order to fight. It was he who had to climb up, no matter how hard he had to struggle for it.

All in all, with a little help from me and some assistance from Nature, the strategy to exhaust Jarasandha was taking shape, but this by itself would not be enough. Following his earlier experience with me, he would come fully prepared this time. And he would come with enough resources to last him for at least three to four months. It was also a foregone conclusion that after having been thwarted twice, his fury would be at its zenith. This meant that I would have to think of some other tactic too. I had just begun pondering over this, when the possibility of another radically different scenario emerged from nowhere. It crossed my mind that to make his climb easier, Jarasandha might burn the very undergrowth which we thought was an obstruction in his path! And if he did that, then we would be staring at a new kind of trouble on the mountain. This meant that I had yet not covered all the contingencies. The dense undergrowth could prove to be a boon or a bane. This difficult to cross undergrowth could prove to be a blessing to us if the thought of burning it did not strike Jarasandha, but if it were set on fire, the same undergrowth would burn us alive and prove to be fatal. Now the question that needed serious consideration was, how could we solve this difficult problem of the undergrowth? It was indeed complicated, but it was necessary to quickly arrive at a solution. After just a little bit of deliberation, I came up with a perfect solution for it. I decided to get the undergrowth removed from the top to approximately halfway down the mountain. There were two reasons for this. The obstacle in Jarasandha's path would remain intact; and even if he set fire to it, the smoke and flames would not reach us because there would be no grass on the top portion to fuel the fire. With the partial removal of the undergrowth, I had now taken all the measures that I could possibly take to fight and save our lives, with the materials and manpower that were available. Meaning, I had carried out

the tasks that were in my hands to their completion. Besides, I was still thinking of additional ways in which Jarasandha could be obstructed. Who knew when and what solution my crafty mind would come up with?

Anyway, the solution would come to me in its own time. For now, let me tell you that by now, we had spent six months on the Gomanta Mountain. And these six months had been spent with the mixed experiences of extreme struggle, plenty of joy and a few personal achievements. But now, it appeared that time was about to change. King Jarasandha could come knocking at my door any moment now. For, considering the efficiency of Jarasandha's spies and the aid provided by the spy networks of his allies, it was quite unlikely for him to be unaware of our refuge on the Gomanta Mountain, even after such a long period. Unfortunately, my assessment proved perfectly accurate. Just as every wait comes to an end, so did my wait for Jarasandha. Very soon, his army arrived there, looking for us. I was the first one to catch a glimpse of the army. As such, it was I who was expecting an attack and I was the one who was constantly on the lookout; and besides, it was me that the army was coming for!

Within the next two days, everyone else also had the pleasure of sighting it!²⁹ Soon, the approaching army could be clearly seen from the mountain. Naturally, Adeshwar and the other tribal people were scared on seeing the mighty army ominously threading its way up the mountain. Now, I had expected everyone to be fearful initially. But as the army kept advancing, the tribal people's panic also kept increasing exponentially. This was not an encouraging sign. Theirs was the only army I had, and if their courage failed, then all would be in vain. So, I had to quickly get down to encouraging them. I gathered everyone and explained philosophically, "It is not that easy to earn so much wealth, so the plunderers were bound to come. But why are you worried? We will all get together and certainly drive them away!" For good measure, I narrated to them a couple of my deeds of valour with suitable embellishments. Naturally, by this time, everyone trusted me so much that they were convinced, for the time being at least.

Well, I might have convinced the others but I could not fool myself. I could understand well enough that death had surrounded us. By now, not only the penants flying high on the domes of their chariots, but even the chariots and the army could be clearly seen. How much time would it take now? It was just a matter of a few days. And in no time, the army reached extremely close to the mountain. Meaning, the one whom I had been waiting for had arrived with great pomp. However, this time around, Jarasandha's army appeared to be quite small. Perhaps, this was the impact of their past experiences. From his previous

experiences, Jarasandha was bound to figure out that a big army cannot fight a battle for a long duration and besides, he was here merely to capture two boys. That may have been so, but the view of the approaching army was quite menacing from the top of the mountain. As it advanced, it appeared clearer and bigger. Now they had come so close, that not just the chariots and carts, even the horses and elephants could be seen clearly. As for the army, it had about two hundred chariots, as many horses and about fifty elephants. Accompanying them, were about three or four hundred foot soldiers. Jarasandha's previous experience had made such an impression on him that even for such a small army, there were about twenty-five bullock carts carrying food and other supplies! Meaning, this time he had decided to come well prepared. He seemed to have made a firm decision not to return empty-handed at any cost. That is why he had come, equipped with complete paraphernalia for killing us. Really, Jarasandha's thirst for revenge was altogether one of a kind. I began to wonder if such a great King had anything better to do other than pursuing me! Or was it that Nature had selected him to continually harass me on its behalf?

I thought, 'Kanhaiya what will you do now? How will you escape death? Once Jarasandha's army climbs up the mountain, you'll only be able to dream of escaping. And look at the height of your delusion! You even have chariots standing by to carry your treasure! Now you can rest assured that along with your life, your treasure will also go to Jarasandha!' Then another voice snivelled within me, 'I... I...can understand that but then, what would happen to Rukmini?' The first voice retorted, 'What can you do when it is not in her destiny to find happiness? Oh, loudmouth! Rukmini will easily get the best of princes. You just worry about your own fate!' The whimpering voice retorted, 'Worry?! What is left for me to worry about? Jarasandha is here to put an end to my worries!' Suddenly, I had started babbling to myself, as if I had lost my mind. Perhaps I had; but anybody would lose his mind on seeing such a well-equipped army. I was the lover of life and the seeker of joy and see what a fine predicament Nature had put me into! Forget about living in peace, Nature was not even willing to let me die in peace! Just then, a voice within me spoke, 'Hey! How can you lose hope so quickly? You are a true *Karmaveer*—a man of action! How can you accept defeat? Stand up and face it resolutely! Awaken your intelligence! You are the one who had danced on the hood of the Kaaliya serpent. It is not in your nature to accept defeat before being defeated, and to forsake life before you actually die. For you, every struggle is a game. So, get up and get ready to play this game too!'

The voice was absolutely right! Now I, Kanhaiya, was all set to play this game! Have you not understood? Jarasandha's army would try to climb the

mountain, and I would try to stop it. He would try to kill me, and I would keep thinking of ways to make him flee. Was this not a fine game? It would be great fun. Let's see who wins this game. Did you see? It was this positive thinking of mine because of which I never remained despondent and hopeless for long. Despair and depression could not even venture close to me. When life itself is a game, then every adversity in life is also a game. So why not enjoy the game under all circumstances and live happily? I had barely managed to somehow compose myself with these thoughts and regain my enthusiasm, when another problem cropped up. Did you not understand? Well, my dear bhaiya was with me, and you know how excited he became in such situations. While I was alarmed and was at my wits' end, he was raring to fight the moment he saw Jarasandha! Tell me, if this enthusiasm of his was not another problem for me, what else was it? I was quietly sitting on a boulder and observing the approaching army, when bhaiya arrived there brandishing his mace. And seeing Jarasandha's army, he jumped with delight, as if Jarasandha had come bearing gifts for him! He was brandishing his mace time and again, as if he would rest only after breaking Jarasandha's skull this time around. The height of his enthusiasm was such that had I not stopped him, he would have rushed down the mountain by this time, as if Jarasandha alone would fight with him, and as if the massive army he had brought along with him had come to Gomanta merely for sightseeing! Who could make him understand that enthusiasm is useful only when it is tempered with good sense? The ill-timed haste to turn into a *Rannveer*—a hero of the battle, from a *Rannchhod*—a deserter of the battle was nothing but plain insanity. Even I wanted to be a *Rannveer*, but only after thinking everything through. For, regardless of the type of warfare, you cannot win without a strategy. When it was clear that bhaiya and I could not possibly defeat such a huge army, then tiring it out was the only viable strategy that could be devised. And they could be exhausted only by stretching the war. This was my plan but without understanding this, bhaiya was repeatedly hindering my plan! Now, was this the time for me to plan the next phase of my strategy, or to try to make him see sense? All in all, before clashing with Jarasandha, I had to repeatedly reason with bhaiya. No matter how many times I tried to knock some sense into him, he would return, wildly brandishing his mace!

Let us leave bhaiya aside and speak of Jarasandha's army. Although the army was small, there were many kings who had accompanied Jarasandha. Prominent among them were Shalva and Dumghosha. This meant that even though the army was small, it was nonetheless packed with great warriors. And as for Jarasandha's enthusiasm, it was indescribable. The moment they reached the base of the mountain, he began addressing all the kings and the army in a

thunderous voice, “Tomorrow morning, all of us should surround the mountain from all sides and immediately start ascending it! And once you reach the top, find those two boys and behead them instantly; and stay put on the mountain until they are dead!” This meant that Jarasandha had allocated only one night for the army to rest. That was fine by me as I could sleep peacefully tonight.

And you will not believe, that I really had a sound sleep that night. Next morning, I swiftly finished my daily routine and perched myself on a boulder near the edge of the mountain. Honestly, I had not even bothered to bathe today. After all, Jarasandha had arrived to give me a royal bath! Well, he repeated his rousing address of the previous night, and soon after, everyone quickly surrounded the mountain. Seeing their enthusiasm and verve, I went numb. Not only Jarasandha’s fervour, but even the fervour of the kings accompanying him did not appear to be any less. But how could fervour alone help? It soon became clear to Jarasandha that chariots could not be ridden up this mountain. Now, when chariots could not be used in this terrain, bringing along the elephants over such a long distance naturally turned out to be a futile exercise for Jarasandha. In the morning, I was the only one to observe this spectacle, but by afternoon, Adeshwar and about twenty more people had accompanied me. They perched themselves on boulders placed along the edge of the hill and began enjoying the spectacle below them. To them, the frustration of the bandit chieftain was highly evident. He was still trying to motivate the charioteers to ride up with the chariots; but how could the chariots be made to ride such a steep incline? Every time they tried, they would slip. Now, not only I, but everyone else was also enjoying this spectacle.

Nevertheless, the army spent the entire day in this mindless activity. I was delighted, for I firmly believed that every battle in life was more of a mental warfare than a physical one. And since Jarasandha had suffered the first mental blow, it could be said that we had already won the first round. Now, even though I had nothing to do with the struggle going on down there, I did have my own personal mental struggle to attend to at the top of the mountain. Seeing all this, bhaiya was really charged up that night. He was constantly persuading me to go down and attack them while they were struggling to climb uphill. And I was engaged in the utterly arduous task of dissuading him instead of attending to a thousand other problems. He kept harping on just one point, “Today, I will smash Jarasandha’s skull!” I had to repeatedly ask him to calm down and tell him that it was not the time to fight yet. “You will never get the opportunity to fight with Jarasandha in a one-to-one duel. He has not only come with a well-equipped army, but there are also numerous great warriors in their midst. We will be destroyed within moments. Let the enemy get a bit exhausted, let some of

their energy get drained, let some of their soldiers die. We are anyway sitting on top of the mountain; let them climb up first. Once they climb up the mountain, then there will be war, whether we want it or not.” You will not believe it, even at the time of such crisis, more than half of my energy was being expended in controlling bhaiya. I could not understand which side he was on.

Anyway, the next morning, beside me, several other people also popped up at the edge of the mountain. This entire unexpected drama had become a mode of entertainment for them. As the day progressed, the number of spectators also kept on increasing. Why would anybody miss this opportunity? After all, the drama unfolding below was peculiar. Funnily enough, Jarasandha had spent two whole days merely in gauging that chariots could not be made to climb the mountain! Thereafter, he tried out the horses. All the chariots were unharnessed and the horses were set free. The poor chariots were rudderless now. In short, with each passing day, the enemy’s time was getting wasted. Fortunately for us, since the mountain was steep and slippery, not a single horse from Jarasandha’s army was able to climb up the mountain even after a week of relentless efforts. And the best part was that the kings accompanying the army had soon become disillusioned on seeing this. They had reached here after such a long and tiring journey. And naturally, the elephants with them must have made the journey very slow and cumbersome indeed. On top of it, this steep mountain had emerged as a fresh nuisance for them. Also, none of these kings had any personal grudge against me. It was only Jarasandha who was burning in the flames of revenge. And it goes without saying that if a person has no personal interest in doing some task, then he does not persevere and gives up easily. In short, even before the war had begun, this was the sorry plight of the kings who had accompanied Jarasandha. After a couple of days of strenuous efforts, it was clear to them that even the horses would not be able to carry the soldiers and climb up the mountain. This meant that if they wanted to reach us, all of them would have to climb up the mountain on their own with the soldiers. Now, how could the kings, who were not accustomed to walking even on the ground, be able to climb up this mountain? But it was Jarasandha’s command, so they had to obey. This was an even more riveting sight. Poor kings! They would somehow manage to climb a little way up, only to come slithering down. It was a splendid sight; we were enjoying ourselves to the hilt. We were getting the opportunity to watch a fine spectacle absolutely free of cost. The mountain was covered by a dense forest, it was steep and there was no clear path to follow. You can imagine the chaos below. The situation was such that even after four to five days of tireless efforts, they had managed to inch just a little way up the mountain. However, the distance they had covered had brought them that much closer to

us.

Anyway, as far as their daily routine was concerned, the entire army would be absolutely exhausted by evening, and as soon as night fell, they would all drop off to sleep. But it had to be admitted, that they were gradually beginning to get accustomed to climbing. And this was definitely not a good sign for us. In short, there were indications that if we did not act quickly, they would succeed in climbing higher. Indeed, what was most commendable was the determination shown by Jarasandha, who was stomping his way up ahead of everyone, even at his age. And you can gauge his age by the fact that he was the father-in-law of my Uncle! Anyway, now the time for merely watching the fun as spectators was over. The army was now slowly but steadily gaining upon us. If we did not take some quick action, then instead of being mere spectators watching the drama, we would soon become a spectacle ourselves! But how could I think? Bhaiya's enthusiasm was proving to be a hindrance and was wasting precious time; and on top of it, a new problem surfaced. Seeing the army advancing steadily towards the top, Adeshwar and the other tribal people had become panicky. Meaning, along with the task of controlling bhaiya, I was now also saddled with this new job of handling these people. Well, there was only one problem, and that was, how to stop the approaching army from reaching us. Meaning, all in all, what had to be ensured was their retreat. But how? This was what I was constantly pondering over. Then suddenly, a brilliant thought struck me. And as soon as this thought crossed my mind, I cheered up. 'Oh yes! What was Jarasandha's weapon till yesterday could well become ours today! Why not burn the grass downhill and surprise Jarasandha's army? And if it was done at night, it would prove to be most effective. This would not only ensure that they retreated, but it would also spread panic in the enemy's army. As such, it was against the prevailing rules of warfare to attack or create any kind of trouble at night. But considering the situation we were in, was I going to be bogged down by any rule? I knew only one rule of warfare – a war had to be won!

So, that night, with the help of the tribal people, I set fire to the grass from the top. It was not a very big conflagration, but it soon reached Jarasandha and his soldiers. Now, fire is fire after all, and the fear it causes at night is beyond description. And as expected, the moment it reached Jarasandha's camp, it caused pandemonium among the soldiers. People were running helter-skelter. Petrified, they all fled right back to the base of the mountain. I was feeling ecstatic on watching this spectacle from the top. After tireless efforts for about fifteen days, they had managed to climb up to some extent, but it was all in vain! And what can I say about the reaction of Adeshwar and the tribal people on seeing this? They started playing drums and cymbals in the middle of the night!

This was the mood among us, but as for all the kings accompanying Jarasandha, it was a huge setback which naturally upset them. Even Jarasandha was no less perturbed. But his determination was not letting him lose composure. This time, he did not want to return empty-handed at any cost. For the next two days, Jarasandha's camp was immersed in discussion. During this meeting, Shalva suggested that the whole mountain should be set on fire. He believed that the two boys would get burnt to ashes and if not, then it would at least serve to clear the mountain of the remaining grass and make it easier for them to ascend. Jarasandha liked Shalva's idea. Thus, they spent the next two days preparing to set fire to the mountain. I was taken aback. We had merely ignited a small fire, but they were bent on burning up the whole mountain! But what could I do about it? Clearly, now it was my turn to be a spectator.

As per their plan, on the third day, they set fire to the whole mountain. Gradually, the whole mountain was engulfed in flames, but fortunately, we were completely safe. Today, I was feeling proud of my far-sightedness. Since I had already had all the undergrowth near the top cleared, the fire was quite far from us, although we could still feel its heat. All this was anticipated, but something else also transpired that even I had not counted upon. By evening, the enemy below was ensnared in a trap of their own making. What happened was that because of the fire, all the large, poisonous snakes on the mountain began to rapidly slither down towards the forest to escape the fire. And on their way down, they caused utter mayhem in the army camp below, biting Jarasandha's elephants, horses and men. Meaning, the snakes vented all their fury on Jarasandha's army. And as if that was not enough, by nightfall, the fire also began to spread downwards. Due to the two-pronged attack by the fleeing snakes and the spreading fire, there was pandemonium in Jarasandha's camp. All of them fled in the opposite direction and took shelter in the distant forest. This was utter humiliation for the army; they had come to climb the mountain, but instead, were forced to flee miles away from it! Moreover, several soldiers had got burnt in the fire while many were injured by snake bites. Indeed, to all of them, the mountain now seemed to possess some kind of a magical power! All of them were now frightened to death. None of them was willing to fight anymore. For, even after twenty days of trying, they could not see even the faintest signs of success. On the contrary, they were needlessly suffering losses of life and property.

My happiness knew no bounds. I had never thought of this possibility. Apart from our own actions, we had also received Nature's support. To tell you the truth, seeing the situation below, I could feel my dreams coming to fruition. Now, it did not seem likely that Jarasandha would climb the mountain again.

Meanwhile, Adeshwar and the tribal people's feelings were no different from mine. The plunderers who had come to steal the treasure were defeated, and seeing this, they had all begun to indulge in wishful thinking. But what can I say? Our wishful thinking did not last long. The forest fire had abated, but the fire that this failure ignited in Jarasandha's heart only served to fuel the simmering embers of his revenge. He was now even more determined not to back down at any cost. Once again, he seemed prepared for a fight to the finish, so much so, that he gathered everyone and after a fiery speech, once again got them ready for a final war. Jarasandha's enthusiasm and energy, even at his age, was truly admirable. Actually, if one has been born as a human being, then one must remain enthusiastic till his last breath. However, the other kings were feeling helpless; they could not ignore Jarasandha's commands without a concrete reason. Therefore, they once again had to reluctantly prepare themselves for war. And this was certainly not a good sign. As you know, the grass on the mountainside had burned down completely. This meant that now, there was nothing that could obstruct their climb. It seemed as if my dreams were proving to be very costly.

Never mind, I thought, we would cross that bridge when we came to it. Now, as the grass on the mountain had been burnt, Jarasandha shrewdly used the opportunity to once again boost the morale of the army, and urged them to scale the mountain yet again and finish us off. After his address, everyone began to reluctantly ascend the mountain from various routes once again. Actually, now, neither did anybody have the strength, nor did anyone want to fight this war. But everyone was helpless in front of Jarasandha's obduracy. And as you know, the pace of any task that is done unwillingly is bound to slacken. Even so, the climb was no longer that difficult, since the hurdle of the undergrowth had all but vanished. Consequently, after just a week of steady climbing, they had come quite close to us. Naturally, on seeing this, panic once again gripped all the tribal people. But since I had one final weapon with me, I was more or less calm. In fact, it was now time to use that weapon. But if this did not work either, then I just did not have any other way to stop them from advancing. Anyway, right now, it was more important to concentrate on my final alternative than to think about all this. They had begun their action, and now it was my turn to act in retaliation. You might have probably forgotten that I had piled up large boulders and rocks on the edge of the mountain for just such an eventuality. But I was not content with this alone. So, I spoke to Adeshwar and also got him to make arrangements for our own escape. I got the chariots to stand by for us on the rear side of the mountain. This was not all; I also got our share of the treasure filled into two chests and had them stashed in the chariots. Moreover, this important

work had not been left to some irresponsible person. Adeshwar himself had been assigned the responsibility of guarding the chariots and the treasure. In short, while Jarasandha and his army had climbed halfway up the mountain, I was not slacking in making my all-round preparations either. Now, it was a fight to the finish anyway. I did not have to wait for him to climb to the top of the mountain. So, as soon as I felt satisfied with the arrangements for our escape with the treasure, I first gathered everyone and motivated them. Naturally, what happened next depended entirely on the effect of this final attack.

As soon as I disclosed my plan to the tribal dwellers, everyone jumped with joy. We decided to implement the plan that night itself. On the other hand, Jarasandha continued scaling the mountain until evening as usual. As soon as evening set in, he set up camp at a point on the mountainside. Some two hundred people, including all the kings, were climbing this mountain in order to finish us off. I was astonished to see these kings, used as they were to sleeping on soft beds, dozing here and there on the hard ground. Indeed, these poor kings were facing extreme hardship, thanks to Jarasandha. But the one who surprised me the most was Jarasandha himself. Even if he managed to finish me off after enduring so much trouble, what would he gain, just the satisfaction of revenge? Does one really need to endure so much suffering merely for that?

Nonetheless, the evening had now set in. After a short while, having had their dinner, most of the soldiers of Jarasandha's army had gone to sleep. But I was in no hurry. Once they slipped into a deep sleep, then Krishna would work his magic. I was stationed at the edge of the mountain with about fifty tribal men, waiting to work my magic. Everyone was ready; they were waiting only for a sign from me. But clever that I was, I gave that signal only around midnight. And with that, we began to push the stones down the mountain. And in no time, it was raining stones from the mountain. First, the smaller stones which were piled ahead were thrown. This was enough to wake them up. This unexpected shower of stones had certainly bewildered everybody. All of them jumped to their feet in an instant. Now nobody could fathom how the mountain could suddenly start hurtling down stones. They had forgotten that anything was possible when Krishna was around. Although everyone was still holding their ground due to Jarasandha's insistence, panic was quickly spreading amongst them. At the same time, they kept asking each other what to do next. I cannot tell you how much I laughed seeing their pitiable condition! I was laughing as I wondered for how long they would be able to continue holding their positions. When the smaller stones had reduced them to such a state of panic, how on earth would they ever be able to bear the avalanche of the huge boulders? Well, there was no need to wait to prove this, so we started pushing down our *Brahmastra*—

our strongest weapon—the huge boulders. Three to four well-built, tribal men had to use all their strength to push down a single boulder. This was enough to gauge their colossal size. With a thunderous sound, these boulders swiftly went crashing down the mountainside. These massive boulders caused a lot of devastation. There was pandemonium everywhere. The huge boulders crushed not only the horses but also many of the soldiers killing several of them. Now how could anyone bear this onslaught in the middle of the night when they had been fast asleep? There was bedlam in the army camp below. The soldiers raced downhill with such speed that in the blink of an eye, they were again at the base of the mountain. This was not all; everyone was in such a state of panic that they continued running even after they had reached the foot of the mountain. Some had grabbed a chariot each and were racing away on them, a few were taking flight on horses and the not-so-fortunate ones, who could neither find a chariot nor a horse, were scurrying for their lives on foot. Funnily enough, everyone was scampering and shrieking on top of their voice, “Run! This mountain has the devil upon it! Run! It is haunted! Save your lives! There is an evil power on this mountain!” Poor Jarasandha kept shouting, “There is no devil here! This is just a trick played by those two infernal boys!” But there was nobody to pay heed to him.

The poor king shouted himself hoarse. “Why are you all fleeing from the battlefield? We cannot leave until we have eliminated these two boys!” But now, nobody was willing to stay back here even for a second. Jarasandha’s order no longer carried any weight. It was perfectly understandable; can a person gripped by abject terror ever be compelled to obey someone’s command? With this frenzied, ignominious departure, the biggest menace in Krishna’s life bid him a hasty farewell and fled.

Success, grand and glorious, had once again come and kissed my feet. Jarasandha’s might was once again defeated by my craftiness. But this was not at all the time to gloat over the victory. Until we escaped safely from here, we could not yet call it a victory. And now that everyone was scurrying away, why would I not do the same? At any rate, I was an old hand at it. Actually, the time for us to flee had arrived too; for, with the passage of time, it was possible that Jarasandha would manage to regroup his forces. No! Never! My mind spurred me on ‘Run Krishna! Run!’ Anything that is auspicious should be done post-haste. So, I immediately bade farewell to the singing and dancing tribal people, and with bhaiya in tow, I took the path on the rear side of the mountain and reached the spot where the chariot stood, laden with our treasure. Adeshwar was standing right there with the chariots and the treasure. We too were ready to scamper as soon as we reached there. As such, it is all right if one wastes time in

any other activity, but one should never waste time when one is escaping! For, the consequences of dilly-dallying in this case are invariably grave. Thinking thus, we hastily thanked Adeshwar, and with repeated promises that we would meet again soon, we got onto our chariots and took off from the mountain.

No sooner had we reached the base of the mountain than I thought that since all our problems had been dealt with wonderfully, why not pacify bhaiya and give him an opportunity to be happy and content too? After all, bhaiya's satisfaction was extremely necessary for my mental peace. Even though Jarasandha was retreating from the battlefield, we could not ignore the fact that we too were escaping. What if bhaiya felt that I had once again forced him to abandon the fight? I was afraid that if he perceived it this way, then he would make my life miserable this time around. With this thought, I asked him to launch an attack on the fleeing army. On hearing this, bhaiya was overjoyed. His chariot almost began to fly. Within moments, he had reached the fleeing enemy soldiers. He was so thrilled that he did not miss a single opportunity to vent his anger and make full use of his mace. Within no time, he had burst open the heads of many of the soldiers. You can understand his enthusiasm from the fact that even though I was adept at riding the chariot, this time, I was left far behind bhaiya. I was just enjoying this beautiful scene from a distance. But after all, for how long could I just be a spectator? I had to satisfy myself too. So, I also felled a couple of fleeing soldiers. I had to create the impression that we had chased Jarasandha off. There was no other rationale behind this battle, now that the enemy was already fleeing. At the most, it was merely a question of assuring ourselves and creating an impression that we had chased Jarasandha away. So, I did not think it made sense to engage in unreasonable violence anymore. We had established what we wanted to. The news that would spread across Aryavarta would be that the army of Jarasandha and his allies had fled in fear of two boys. These two boys had proved to be very powerful. Nobody knew of the strategies we had used to defeat them. Neither would anyone find out that we were not alone on top of the mountain. Meaning, it was just the two of us who would be credited with this valourous deed. And certainly, our reputation as valourous men would prove useful all our lives. Thus, the violence we had indulged in now could not be termed useless from any perspective. It was very useful indeed.

However, this was enough; I did not think it was appropriate to indulge in any more unnecessary violence. So, I repeatedly called out to bhaiya, but he was enjoying himself so much, that he was in no mood to return. I could not understand what he was up to; I thought, was he going to escort Jarasandha all the way to Magadha? I wondered what pleasure he was deriving out of chasing soldiers who were already on the run; he just went on chasing them! And you

know very well that I would forget everything when I saw bhaiya in a happy mood; so, there was no question of my forcing him to return and spoiling his fun. I quietly parked my chariot under a tree and fondly observed bhaiya enjoying himself as he decimated the retreating army.

Suddenly, a King approached me. I instantly became alert, but his demeanour did not appear to be hostile. As such, there was no threat because he had come alone; his chariot and soldiers were standing at a little distance. Still, I was not one to fall for any tricks. Not only did I jump down from my chariot, but just to be on the safe side, I also gripped the discus in my hand. By this time, he had come within speaking distance. Before I could fathom anything, he greeted me with folded hands. With this one gesture of his, I was now assured that he meant no harm. I too greeted him in return and immediately let my guard down. He then introduced himself without delay, “I am your father’s sister’s husband, meaning your Uncle, Chhediraj Dumghosh,” he said³⁰. The moment I heard who he was, I immediately bowed and paid my respects. I had heard quite a lot about him from my mother, but was meeting him for the first time. I had felt needlessly proud thinking that this cowherd boy had become so important, that now, even mighty kings had begun to come to pay their respects. But it turned out to be only a meeting of two relatives. Such things happen sometimes, and they happen especially with someone who likes to feel conceited about every little thing!

Suddenly, Chhediraj came a little closer to me and striking up a conversation, said in a very grave voice, “I was intentionally waiting back just to meet you. Actually, seeing the destruction that you two brothers had wreaked, even I wanted to flee, but I had to wait, as it was important to give you some information. Let me tell you clearly that from my heart, I staunchly oppose Jarasandha, but what do I say, my son and your brother, Shishupala, is completely under Jarasandha’s control. I had to come here solely because of him. In fact, Shishupala was going to accompany Jarasandha in this battle, but I did not want one brother to fight another. Therefore, out of compulsion, I accompanied Jarasandha instead. There were two reasons behind this; firstly, I wanted to help you if the need arose, and secondly, I came so that I could prevent two brothers from fighting each other. You have certainly done a valourous deed by defeating Jarasandha.”

It was true! We had single-handedly defeated the one whose name sent shivers across the entire Aryavarta belt! It was certainly a matter of immense pride. And why should I lie to you, I was feeling extremely proud of myself ever since Jarasandha had fled. For that matter, I was not one to miss such an opportunity, and one should not even think of missing a chance like this. When

you have accomplished a great feat, you are certainly entitled to be proud of it. And mind you, this was no ordinary feat; my arch-enemy, because of whom I had to flee from the battlefield, was now himself frightened and was fleeing from the battlefield with his entire well-equipped army! Then I thought, forget it, I had an entire lifetime to revel in this pride. Right now, it was time to focus on the urgent message which after going through a lot of trouble Uncle was waiting to deliver. Incidentally, he appeared even more eager to convey the message than I was to hear it. And his grave demeanour clearly indicated that the message was important. Perhaps, it was because of the gravity of the message that Uncle had fallen silent for a moment. Still, I was puzzled about this important news that he wanted to convey to me. As far as I was concerned, the only significant news could be one related to Jarasandha, whom I had defeated right in front of Uncle's eyes.

Regardless, seeing that I was now ready to listen to him, he spoke in a very serious voice, "I have some bad news for you. Your grandfather, King Ugrasena, had sent out spies in search of you. And, along with the spies, he had sent your friend Uddhava, because your grandfather believed that he was the only one who would recognise you in any disguise. But unfortunately, Jarasandha's spies were extremely vigilant. They followed Uddhava, and it was only by following him that they learnt about your hideout."

Fine, but what about Uddhava? For, he had still not reached here. Naturally, I became worried. After all, this was my friend Uddhava that he was talking about. But before I could ask anything about Uddhava, Uncle, on seeing me became grave, took a deep breath and continued, "Unfortunately, Uddhava went to Karvirpur in search of you. There, he hunted high and low for you, but while he was looking for you, he fell into deep trouble. For some reason, Shringlava, the King of Karvirpur made him his prisoner. Consequently, Uddhava got trapped there and Jarasandha dropped in here. This news has been able to reach you only because your grandfather used all his experience while sending Uddhava on his quest. Actually, he had secretly asked many of the kings who are friendly to him, like me, to help Uddhava along and find you using our own spies. And as my kingdom is close to Karvirpur, our spies instantly got the news of his capture."

On hearing this, I was stunned. My dear friend, Uddhava, was in deep trouble and that too because of me! Naturally, all my pleasure at defeating Jarasandha and acquiring so much wealth vanished in a trice. Seeing that I was so shocked, Uncle tried to console me and said, "I do not know for certain what Uddhava has been charged with, but now, it is your duty to save him from the clutches of Shringlava." But of course, there was no doubt that I would do just

that. Now there was no question about what our next destination would be. We definitely had to go to Karvirpur to rescue Uddhava. We had barely breathed a sigh of relief when another dangerous task had reared its ugly head before us. My life was a bizarre, topsy-turvy ride! To tell you the truth, it had become an unending series of perilous missions. Peace and happiness never stayed in our lives for long! Uncle had just finished speaking and I had just begun to think of the next course of action, when bhaiya returned from the battlefield. I immediately introduced him to Uncle, but bhaiya was in his own world. He kept swinging his mace in front of us and kept shouting, "I chased Jarasandha off. He had come to clash with me! You should have seen him running away with his tail tucked in!"

Seeing bhaiya so charged up, I momentarily forgot all about Uddhava. I was happy to see that at least, thanks to this battle, he was back to his normal self. Indeed, this was precisely why I had sent him to chase Jarasandha's retreating army. I knew my brother well; if we had left without fighting at all, he would have considered even this act as one of cowardly desertion. And as you would remember, the last time we had fled from the battlefield, he had remained angry with me for a full seven months. If I had done that again, he would have probably remained angry with me for the next seven years! All things considered, this decision of mine had been good for both of us. However, this joy was short-lived. My mind was once again gripped by the anxiety arising out of Uddhava's imprisonment. I was really quite shaken up by this news. But oblivious to this, bhaiya was still prattling away. He was so intoxicated by his victory, that he was not even aware of our grave demeanour. But now, enough was enough. For how long could I wait? So, in a bid to bring him back to his senses, when I told him about Uddhava, he replied airily: "So what? When we have successfully beaten off Jarasandha, of what consequence is Shringlava?" Now, how was I to explain to him that we had been able to defeat Jarasandha due to a clever strategy? There was a possibility that we might have to engage in battle with Shringlava. But it was useless to explain all this to bhaiya, especially now, when he was so intoxicated with his own success. It was a strange scene. All three of us were standing near our two chariots but each of us was in a different state of mind. While bhaiya was gloating on his victory, I was gripped with worry. And poor Uncle was casting one glance at bhaiya and the other at me. Looking at bhaiya's mood, my mind had gone completely blank; I could just not understand what to do next and how I was going to rescue Uddhava!

However, Uncle came to my rescue. He appeared to be not only straightforward and loving, but wise too. Understanding our present requirements, he immediately made arrangements for five chariots and a small

coterie of soldiers to accompany us. Even better was the fact that these soldiers were not only familiar with every nook and cranny of Karvirpur, but they were also acquainted with the political situation in the kingdom. Many people extend their help, however, help that is offered at the right time, at the right place, and that too without having to ask for it, can only be offered by a far-sighted, wise person.

Well, now that I had my Uncle's support, my mind became active once again. Firstly, I thanked Uncle profusely for bringing me news about Uddhava, and for his magnificent gift of chariots and soldiers. Actually, he was Uddhava's Uncle as well. Oh, this reminds me! I have never told you that Uddhava was a distant cousin of mine. But more than that, we were good friends and perhaps that is why I had forgotten to mention this before. That aside, we now took Uncle's blessings and immediately left for Karvirpur. This time, bhaiya and I sat on the same chariot. Naturally, the treasure too was kept in that chariot, so that I would not have to worry about it and could focus on rescuing Uddhava instead. Who knew what condition he was in, what trials he was going through! I became really worried thinking about him. Our caravan of seven chariots was moving at a slow but steady pace towards Karvirpur. Bhaiya was still not taking things seriously. He was so ecstatic with our victory over Jarasandha that he refused to come to terms with reality. No matter, but it would be better if this ebullience subsided before we reached Karvirpur.

Chapter 8

Saving Uddhava From The 'Hell' Of Shringlava

The journey to Karvirpur took just one day. But since it was night by the time we reached there, we had no choice but to get some rest. We found an *ashram* on the outskirts of the city and spent the night there. As soon as we had got the rooms, I first arranged for our treasure chests to be moved into the rooms. As a precautionary measure, we also had the chariots parked at the back

of the *ashram*. It would certainly look suspicious if someone was to see them. Furthermore, even bhaiya had sobered down now. He too had begun worrying about Uddhava. On the other hand, this night halt of ours was unquestionably just a necessity due to the late hour of our arrival and there was no chance of us being able to sleep. Thus, we tossed and turned, worrying about poor Uddhava and waiting for dawn.

As soon as the first rays of the sun lit up the sky, I set off to see the city with bhaiya. We were dressed as ordinary villagers. Actually, I first wanted to see and understand the nature of the kingdom. Naturally, before attacking an enemy, it is necessary for a good warrior to understand the enemy's psyche. I was probably not a great warrior, but I certainly was a very good strategist. Two days after moving around in the city, whatever I had seen certainly indicated a lot of danger. The situation was even graver than what we had heard. King Shringlava had started to think of himself as Lord Vishnu. Perhaps, he was mentally unsound. But this was not the problem. The real problem was that whoever refused to accept him as the Supreme Lord had to undergo severe punishments. The height of his insanity was that he had created a special 'hell'—a place of torture—where non-believers were taken and tortured in an inhumane manner. What was even more shocking was that he had dumped most of the *Acharyas* of his kingdom into this 'hell', for they were the ones who were protesting the most against this preposterous idea. Indeed, this had certainly created an atmosphere of great fear among the common people. And these poor, frightened people had no choice but to accept Shringlava as Lord Vishnu. The most painful aspect of this brutality was that he was forcing the *Acharyas* and *Brahmans* to pull his chariots. Indeed, it was extremely distressing, that in order to maintain his supremacy, he was forcing the venerable *Acharyas* to perform such menial tasks. And the height of his atrocity was that if the pace of the chariot slackened, or if the poor *Acharyas* felt exhausted, he would not hesitate to even whip them. Even Kansa had never been so cruel. Could any ruler torture his innocent subjects in such a manner? It is indeed the ego of man which makes him stoop to subhuman levels.

Anyway, returning to the current situation, I was convinced that even Uddhava must have been dumped in this hell. I knew Uddhava's nature quite well. He would have never accepted such a cruel King as God. And this was probably why he must have been punished. Considering the situation and seeing Shringlava's sway over his kingdom, it seemed extremely difficult to save Uddhava. However, it was futile to think about this now, because before that, I had to ascertain if Uddhava was really in 'hell' or not. Once I had confirmed that, then I would think of what to do next. However, without entering it, I could not find out if he was in the 'hell' or not. Now, getting into a prison was not that easy. Well, in a way, it was also the easiest thing in the world. All I had to do was to deny that Shringlava was God. But the problem was, this would not help us to free Uddhava. On the contrary, we ourselves might have to rot in that hellish prison. All said and done, it was even more essential to return from that 'hell' than it was to enter it. So, the situation was extremely complex. But to tell you the truth, I did not enjoy an easy challenge anymore either. Inconsequential moves no longer satiated my crafty mind. Maybe that was why I soon found a solution to this conundrum. But I needed bhaiya's help in executing this plan. And you know how my bhaiya was, especially when it was a matter of relinquishing his pride. You know very well that bhaiya could fight heroically but he did not know how to be humble. Most certainly, getting him to be modest was a big challenge in itself. Even so, since it involved saving Uddhava's life—and he was very close to bhaiya as well—he agreed after I requested him just a couple of times. And with that, I could very well say that I had won a great battle!

Early next day, according to my plan, we reached the royal palace at about prayer time. Right from the patio of the palace, I began to chant loudly, "Glory to Lord Vishnu! Glory to Lord Vishnu!" Don't be surprised; devotees could go in and out of the royal palace without any restrictions, and in that case, how long would it take for me to pose as a devotee? And posing as devotees instantly proved advantageous to us. Despite the tight security, we entered the palace without any hurdles whatsoever. The courtroom was a veritable temple. And right in front of us, seated grandly upon a high throne, was King Shringlava, pretending to be Lord Vishnu! The dark-skinned, short-statured King looked very strange, thanks to his pudgy frame. Even his courtroom appeared strange. Behind the courtiers, there were arrangements for the devotees to sit and stand amidst tight security. Funnily enough, not only was the court filled to capacity with 'devotees' but it also resounded with chants glorifying Lord Vishnu. If my estimate was correct, then at that moment, there were about five hundred devotees in the palace...oh no, I meant... in the temple of 'Lord

Vishnu!’ Utterly shocked on seeing this spectacle, I stopped at the entrance for a moment. Even bhaiya stood stupefied beside me; I was stunned beyond words. Truly, pride makes people do such strange things! Moreover, if one is gripped by the ego of being divine, then one can be considered as a lost cause.

Well, I remained standing like a statue and it was time for the ‘Lord’s’ worship. Everybody stood up in their places to make offerings and prayers. The prayers too were offered in loud voices. We too stood in the crowd and immensely enjoyed the prayers. As soon as the ceremony was over, I once again took up my loud chant: “Glory to Lord Vishnu! Glory to Lord Vishnu!” At the same time, according to the plan, I inched close to Shringlava. You will not believe it, I was now shouting so loudly that everyone’s attention was on me. Even Shringlava could not help but turn his attention to me. After all, that was precisely the reason why I had been shouting myself hoarse. Bhaiya did not like all this drama, but since it was a question of saving Uddhava’s life, he quietly came behind me, sulking all the time. And fortunately, some other devotees had also come along with me. I had dashed ahead of everybody and now stood in front of the King. Surprisingly, it was only now that I saw an extraordinarily beautiful woman sitting beside him. I learnt that she was his sister, Shaivya. That was great! She too was with him in this wicked game! Well, like a humble devotee, I quietly touched Shringlava’s feet and respectfully stood in front of him with folded hands. Bhaiya’s ego was unable to tolerate this excessive devotion of mine. He simmered with rage for a moment. Honestly, every time we had to use our wits instead of brute strength, bhaiya would prove to be a living, breathing bundle of trouble. Indeed, on such occasions, I had to invariably fight simultaneously on two fronts. As for me, I was certainly not as strong as bhaiya, but every time, I had to clash with opponents who were several times stronger than me. This was why, I was compelled to use my intelligence in such situations, whether I liked it or not. And necessity makes a person an expert at his task. Indeed, it is not possible to fight an entire army alone by using one’s might. This task can be accomplished only through a proper strategy. Thus, as soon as the opportunity presented itself, I bowed to the King and like an ardent devotee, with folded hands, I said to Shringlava, “My Lord! I have a humble request to make.”

He was already impressed by my devotion, so he replied proudly, “You can certainly speak, my dear man!”

Pointing to bhaiya, I said, “O King, this is my friend. He has come from a distant land. Owing to this, he has not heard of your wonderful feats. The naïve boy is not willing to accept you as God! I feel that he should be given a glimpse of hell once. That, I am sure, will set his mind right.”

Well, I had made my move, and now the King was deep in thought. Certainly, nobody must have asked to be shown 'hell' till that day. I did not mind that he was thinking about it, but on hearing my proposal, bhaiya had lost all control, and I most certainly had a problem with that! The fool that he was, he mumbled in my ear, "What are you doing? Let us kill this cruel King straight away! Let us make him cry out to his God in his own court!" You will not believe it, even in such a delicate situation, I had to patiently explain matters to him. "We are surrounded by guards," I hissed. "The moment we say something stupid, or make aggressive moves, we will be as good as dead! Our primary objective is to find where Uddhava is and then we will smash his head." But I also knew that bhaiya could not be made to stay calm for long, no matter how much I tried to trick him. So, it meant that I had to do something quickly. This is the problem with the ego; it knows how to kill or be killed, but it does not know how to recognise the delicacy of the situation, remain humble and escape. It just does not know how to accomplish the task. On the other hand, look at me; I was unique. I was ready to become as humble as possible to realise my goal. In fact, I had just touched Shringlava's feet in feigned reverence. Why leave any stone unturned to accomplish one's goal? This is what I call the egoless state.

Well, finally, my feigned devotion bore fruit and my plan succeeded. Shringlava agreed to my request and magnanimously allowed me and bhaiya a tour of his hell along with a few soldiers. My goodness! This 'hell' proved to be even worse than the one so vividly described in religious texts! Prisoners were being tortured in the most unimaginable ways possible! I was livid with anger. About thirty to forty prisoners were crammed into one cell.

I could see scores of such cells. In an open space in the front, some prisoners were unnecessarily being whipped, while some had been forced to lie down on the rocky ground and were being kicked. The scene was extremely terrifying indeed. How could human beings be treated in such an inhuman manner? I shuddered to the core of my being. I could clearly see that Shringlava had ferreted out different kinds of tortures from useless religious texts. Well, whoever wrote such scriptures could not have been any less vile. Anyway, the soldiers were proudly giving us the tour of 'hell'. I too studiously kept my emotions under control and focussed entirely on locating Uddhava from among the inmates. As we were passing yet another chamber, my gaze fell on the familiar form of my dear friend Uddhava, who was being tortured. His beard was overgrown and his face was the colour of death itself. Seeing him in this condition was nothing less than torture for me. Naïve that he was, when Uddhava saw us, he nearly shouted with joy, but I instantly signalled to him with my eyes to keep quiet. He obeyed, but bhaiya could not bear to see his friend

Uddhava in this appalling condition. So, he shouted in anger. Now, this was bhaiya's drawback; he appeared very tough and spoke roughly, but he was actually very soft-hearted and innocent. On the other hand, I was adept in all such matters. There was no question of my losing control over my emotions at the wrong place, at the wrong time or for the wrong person. That was why, when the soldiers demanded to know why bhaiya had screamed, I was able to turn the situation around very easily. I said he was frightened at seeing the torture being meted out in this 'hell'.

For the time being, it was sufficient for us to know that Uddhava was being detained here. A plan to rescue him could be made only after we got out of here. And from what we had seen till now, even that seemed a bit challenging. For my plan to work, bhaiya's utmost cooperation was essential even to get out of here, but seeing his emotional outburst, he did not seem to be in a position to do so. Normally, bhaiya would have cooperated with me, but after witnessing Uddhava's plight, getting him to support me had become even more difficult. Well, whether it was difficult or easy, we had to get out of here, and for that, I had to somehow convince bhaiya. While on our way out, I folded both my hands and, in a whisper, pleaded with bhaiya to hail Lord Vishnu on our way outside. I told him that the King should become convinced that he had come to his senses on seeing this hell as this was the only way we could safely leave the courtroom. You can very well imagine what bhaiya could have done to me on hearing my entreaty. But I was no less; I managed to convince him by telling him to do it for the sake of Uddhava. And thus, victory was once again at my feet as we walked out of the royal court safely, shouting, "Glory to Lord Vishnu! Glory to Lord Vishnu!"

Although we returned to the *ashram* safe and sound, we had completely lost our peace of mind. Even after racking my brains constantly, I could not devise any plan to save Uddhava. The problem was quite grave, and we had to find a solution quickly. Upon seeing Uddhava's condition, bhaiya seemed to have sunk into depression. Every now and then, his sorrow would burst out in the form of burning rage. I was deeply disturbed too and far angrier than bhaiya, but it did not mean that I would start thinking of hare-brained solutions like smashing Shringlava's skull in his courtroom! The problem demanded an in-depth analysis. But bhaiya was not interested in planning or discussions. He just wanted to smash Shringlava's head, as if, the moment bhaiya went to the courtroom, Shringlava would bow his head and say, "Here, brother Balarama, please crack my skull open!" Anyway, with my relentless pondering over this problem, my compassion overtook my anger. I yearned to free not only Uddhava, but also all the others who were being tortured in this 'hell' created by

Shringlava. Why just them, I wanted to liberate all the people of Karvirpur and give them back their lost freedom and happiness. But how could I do that? I could not battle with him with just four soldiers under my command. Neither could I hope to reason with him. What then was the solution to this? Finally, after analysing the situation from every angle, I could see only one clear solution to this problem—killing Shringlava. For, nothing else seemed possible unless the root of the problem itself was eliminated. It was my belief that the people and the soldiers would be under duress only as long as he was alive. Once the King himself was killed, then who would bother? There was no question of the people and the soldiers supporting such a despotic King. In short, I decided to put Shringlava to death. But merely making a decision would not yield any outcome. It was not as if I could take bhaiya's oft-repeated advice and rush to the palace and smash open Shringlava's head. Such audacity in the court could put our lives in peril. Thus, the task had to be accomplished intelligently. Meaning, he had to be killed when he was in a less secure place. And obviously, such a place could be found only outside the palace. Considering the tight security, finding such a spot did not seem to be easy either.

However, once I had decided on this course of action, I began to work on it. After much investigation, I found one such opportunity. I learnt that every full moon night, the King went out in a procession in a ceremonial chariot. At that time, a large crowd would gather on either side of the street. And in such a crowd, it would not be difficult to find a chink in the security arrangements. Fortunately, a full moon night was due in just three days. Meaning, we did not even have to wait for long to execute our plan. As such, our stay at Karvirpur had revealed one more thing. The people were completely fed up with Shringlava. It was just that their fear of Shringlava outweighed their discontent. To tell you the truth, even the majority of the soldiers seemed to be against him. Anyway, who would be on the side of a sinful King, except for his own sins? Many of my personal experiences had proven this truth before. You would remember, when I had killed Kansa, the circumstances were similar. Even during the killing of Panchajanya, the situation was no different. You would remember that neither the subjects, nor the soldiers had retaliated when their King was killed. So, who would oppose the killing of Shringlava? The matter became crystal clear to me; it was impossible to escape only after killing a King who was respected by his subjects and whose soldiers were truly devoted to him. But why would I ever need to kill such a King in the first place? Forget it for now; we will discuss this some other time. So, the plan of action was finalised. Now, all that remained to be done was to wait for the full moon night.

That was not very far either, and soon the day arrived. I woke up early in

the morning. However, nothing much was to be accomplished by waking up early; the procession of the ceremonial chariot was scheduled only for the evening, which seemed to take an eternity to arrive. I was ready and waiting right since morning. In the name of preparation, I did not have much to do; I just had to take my discus with me. I kept pacing the room from one end to the other, reaching the pinnacle of restlessness, and finally, this long wait came to an end. Just before the scheduled time of the procession, bhaiya and I reached the main square of Karvirpur. It was a matter of just a few moments, and yet, the wait seemed to be too long, perhaps because it involved Uddhava. Well, bhaiya and I were stationed near a tree.

As this tree was on higher ground, the main square could be easily seen from here. On the other side, a huge crowd had already gathered on the road. There were quite a lot of people even where we stood. Everyone was waiting for a glimpse of their God. Anyway, as for me, I could not bear this wait. It was then that four chariots came clattering from the direction of the royal palace. The soldiers seated on them were using their whips to move the crowd aside. Just see, this is how they were making way for their God! So, God's chariot was expected any moment now. Finally, this wait too came to an end. 'Lord Vishnu's'... I mean King Shringlava's chariot, pulled by twelve *Acharyas*, finally arrived on the square. Around two hundred devotees were following it, singing and dancing. About a thousand-strong crowd stood waiting on the road. The scene was really scary, but my focus was entirely on Shringlava. Surprisingly, even at this time, his sister, Shaivya was sitting beside him. People were queuing up to offer prayers and to garland their God. I stood quietly behind a pillar and watched the elaborate drama put up by the fearful subjects of a demoniac King. Even though I kept glancing at this farce, every now and then, my eyes were fixed on Shringlava's neck. I was completely alert and ready. The King's chariot was proceeding towards us. By now, I had stealthily fixed the discus on my finger. And as soon as his chariot passed us, I took a careful aim and hurled my discus at his neck. There was no question of it missing its mark at such a crucial moment. In an instant, his head was severed from his body and fell with a sickening thud on the chariot floor.

On seeing their God's severed head, the entire crowd was shocked into silence. The next moment, there was pandemonium everywhere. There was panic and fear all around. Meanwhile, realising how delicate the situation was, I immediately began to shout out loudly to divert the people's attention, "This is how a sinner's life ends. This is how a sinner must be punished!" Bhaiya was not one to be left behind either. I had only used my brains but he did not hesitate to use his might. He immediately swung his mace and in one swoop, brought down

four-five soldiers who were standing close by. And before anyone could understand what was happening, or come forward in Shringlava's favour, we began building up an atmosphere against him. Bhaiya's 'mace swinging' was certainly proving very helpful in this. His act of killing the soldiers had such an effect, that everyone else backed off. No one dared to stand in support of Shringlava now. All of them were anyway fed up of the King's cruelty. Indeed, in their heart of hearts, they must have even prayed a number of times for deliverance from him. Such being the situation, how long would it take for them to calm down? The truth was that as soon as everyone was certain of Shringlava's death, the situation turned in my favour. Even the soldiers bowed down to me. Within moments, slogans in my praise resonated all over the square. The only exception was his sister Shaivya. She sat in the chariot, livid with rage. It was clear that she was unable to reconcile herself to her brother's killing. This was not all; she was even glowering at me as she sat inside the chariot. So intense was her anger, that I was not able to even look her in the eye. Well, she could not help it; her brother's head and decapitated body were still lying on the floor of the chariot.

Well, before her anger could create some problem, I thought it best to immediately engage myself in the tasks that lay ahead. The people were with me at present, but their emotions were fickle and they could very easily become sentimental, change their loyalties and turn against me. No, no! If that were to happen, all that we had done would have been rendered futile. Indeed, we could have even ended up losing our lives. Thus, I instantly decided to act and moved forward, tearing through the crowd. Half the people had already left for their homes, fearing that something untoward would happen. So, it was not difficult to cover that distance. Thus, I strode ahead and climbed Shringlava's chariot. Bhaiya too climbed in behind me, swinging his mace all the while. Shaivya could not understand why we had got into her chariot. She would soon come to know about my intent. I instantly touched the raw nerve of the crowd and loudly asked it to join us as we were going to release the innocent prisoners from 'hell'. Hearing this, a wave of delight swept over the people. Even the soldiers were not any less ecstatic. Within moments, slogans were being shouted in my praise. This was bound to happen; the prisoners, after all, were the relatives of the subjects and the soldiers.

Well, with the people behind me, I was enthused. And driven by that enthusiasm, we immediately alighted from the chariot and set off towards the 'hell'. A crowd of about three to four hundred people and around twenty soldiers followed us. Meaning, His Majesty, Krishna, had become the leader of Karvirpur as soon as he had arrived! Surprisingly, we were moving ahead without any

obstructions; nobody was opposing us anywhere. And in the blink of an eye, our procession had reached the main entrance of 'hell'. News of Shringlava's death had reached here as well. And whatever remained to be done was accomplished by the soldiers who had come along with us, after they apprised the soldiers stationed in the 'hell'. Not only was the main entrance opened immediately, but the doors of all the cells were also unlocked. And within moments, everyone, including Uddhava, was rescued from this 'hell'. Seeing Uddhava freed and standing in front of us, both bhaiya and I wept with joy. Uddhava too clung to us and wept his poor, unsullied heart out. It was surprising, even after going through such an ordeal, he still had tears left to shed. Well, what could he do? That poor fellow must have never expected us to reach this place. Perhaps, he had mentally prepared himself to rot here all his life. So, it was natural that his tears would begin to flow on being unexpectedly rescued from this place.

Anyway, the rescued prisoners began shouting our praises. In the meanwhile, with the prisoners released, the fervour of the crowd intensified. Such was the zeal among the people that a crowd of about five hundred came to drop us till our *ashram*, shouting our praises all the while. This was not all; they stood outside the *ashram* for quite some time and kept shouting slogans glorifying us. Seeing the joy among the people and the respect and honour being accorded to me, I could understand quite well that now, there was no danger here. I felt reassured about this, especially after receiving the support of the soldiers. Well, to tell you the truth, this was why I continued to stay at this *ashram*; otherwise, I would have fled much earlier. You know very well that I would scamper away whenever I sensed even a hint of danger.

By nightfall, celebrations had broken out across Karvirpur. It seemed almost as if the people were celebrating the death of their King. But yes, they did have a reason to be happy, after all. For, not just the prisoners, but in a way, all of Karvirpur was breathing freely after a long time. So, the celebration of their freedom was bound to be on a large scale. People thronged the streets, and all night long, they congratulated each other, expressed their happiness and shouted our praises. Watching the people in such a celebratory mood, I wondered, how unfortunate must be the King upon whose death his subjects rejoiced to such an extent! Whether it was Kansa or Shringlava, what did they gain by nursing such an ego? Well, if I looked at this situation keeping the ultimate truth in mind, then all this had become possible because of Uddhava. He was the instrument of liberation for the people of Karvirpur from the torturous reign of King Shringlava. Speaking of Uddhava, the poor fellow was still in a grave condition. Actually, he appeared to be in a miserable state of mind. He needed a strong dose of reassurance. Thus, we immediately diverted all our attention from Karvirpur

and its people, and focussed entirely on helping Uddhava regain his health and mental well-being. However, even after spending the whole night attending to him, he showed little signs of improvement. Clearly, the torture he had undergone in ‘hell’ had seriously damaged his psyche.

Well, all that would be dealt with in time. But on waking up the next morning, before we could think of our next move, a guard from the royal palace brought the message that Queen Padmavati had arrived to meet us. For me, this was completely unexpected. I could not think of any clear reason why she had come to meet me. Now, whether I understood her intentions or not, I had to meet her. Thus, trying to guess the possible reasons behind her arrival, I immediately got up and went to meet her. She was standing at the entrance of the *ashram*. I was dumbstruck on seeing her. Shringlava’s mother, meaning Queen Padmavati, was extremely attractive and impressive despite being sixty-five years old. Not only this, she appeared fully assured, composed and very confident. She had not come alone. Shaivya, of course, had accompanied her along with a young boy. She had come with a procession of six chariots. Also, there were scores of soldiers with her. About a hundred-strong crowd had also come to see us. But I could not focus on them right now. I touched the Queen’s feet. But surprisingly, neither did she extend her hand out to bless me, nor did she say a word in reply. She did, however, look at me carefully from head to toe, as if she was trying to assess me or find something. I became alert on seeing her behaviour. I was anyway completely clueless about the reason behind her arrival. Moreover, she was Shringlava’s mother, who had just lost her son. So not only was I curious to see her reaction, but it had also become necessary for me to see it. It was a strange scene; I was standing right in front of her. She was trying to gauge and understand me and similarly, I was trying to fathom what she wanted from me. Unaware of this silent little contest between us, the crowd stood outside, shouting slogans of praise for me, interspersed by praises for the Queen.

However, I did not have to remain curious for long. After evaluating me at length, the Queen broke the silence, “This is Shringlava’s sister, Shaivya,” she said. Then she pushed the child forward and said, “And this is his son, Shakradeva.” After the introductions, she heaved a deep sigh and continued, “It is obvious that the citizens of Karvirpur are very happy with you. They are singing your glory at every street corner. I have come to ask you, have you killed my son Shringlava to take over the throne of Karvirpur?”

The Queen’s arrival itself was unexpected for me. On top of that, her straight question shattered all my hopes. I continued to remain silent and gazed into her eyes. She appeared completely calm. I could not detect any trace of grief for her slain son in her eyes. I was spellbound by her equanimity and maturity.

Perhaps, these were the qualities of great queens and kings. For that matter, to be able to return to normalcy immediately after any incident is the best quality that any human being can possess. And as far as kings and queens were concerned, they should certainly possess it. This is because, in my opinion, an emotionally weak King can be as dangerous as a cruel and proud one.

As for me, the Queen's serene eyes were giving me great peace of mind. There was definitely no malice in those eyes. And as of now, this was what reassured me the most. When we are on the topic of reassurance, let me also tell you the reasons for my dissatisfaction, which I was simultaneously feeling at this moment. The Queen's daughter, Shaivya, dressed in white clothes, appeared angrier than before. Seeing her raging fury, I felt something stir deep within me. To be honest, I felt a little intimidated. However, I controlled myself in a moment. But now what? I asked myself, why did I feel this way? It was the first time in my life that I had felt any kind of tremor within me. And on the basis of this experience, I can say that there is no difference between trembling with fear and dying. The moment in which I had trembled with fear was also the moment in which I had died. Perhaps, I had experienced this shivering so that I could understand its terror. Otherwise, would I ever shake with fear? I did not tremble when I faced the serpent Kaaliya or the demon Keshi. I did not shiver when I faced Kansa or Jarasandha. So, it was strange that Shaivya's anger had made me tremble. Perhaps, the bitter experience of my aunts' anger was still fresh in my mind. And why would it not be? It was thanks only to that anger that even at present I was wandering from one place to another. It was that fury which had sent the fiend Jarasandha after me. I can now say with certainty that trembling is the greatest of man's sins. If you remember, this was the experience I had shared with Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita. *"O Arjuna! Why are you shaking with fear on seeing the huge army of the Kauravas? It is this trembling which is the sin. Be it happiness or sorrow, man should always live in equanimity. Whether you tremble because of happiness or sorrow, both are akin to living in hell."*³¹

Anyway, we have discussed enough about Shaivya. Now let me tell you something about Shringlava's son, Shakradeva who was ten years old. He appeared extremely attractive and talented. And curiously, he too did not seem very affected by his father's death. Coming back to the Queen's question, I had, in the meantime, completely prepared my answer to the Queen's unexpected question. Not only the Queen, but even the assembled crowd was impatiently waiting to hear my answer. As such, some people were shouting slogans and persuading me to ascend the throne. But I was not one to be trapped like this. I had to move forward on the basis of my own decision. Thus, with folded hands

and a calm and humble look upon my face, I replied, “No, Mother! I did not kill Shringlava with the intention of becoming the King.³² The only thing that I had in mind when I killed him, was his oppression and the interests of the people. In fact, the truth is that his own actions led the King to his death. I was merely the instrument. Still, I beg your forgiveness if I have hurt you, knowingly or unknowingly.”

Queen Padmavati was listening to every word that I said with rapt attention. I too was equally attentive as I stood before her, trying to gauge her reaction to my words. In short, both of us were trying to understand each other’s motives. Fortunately, everything that I had said so far seemed to have had a positive impact on her. It was bound to, for my words and my intentions were clear. I had faced very similar circumstances when I had killed Kansa. What I mean to say is, that experience was still fresh in my mind. Thus, I continued to speak, displaying my maturity, and said with quiet confidence, “I wish that King Shringlava be given a royal funeral. I will also be present to pay homage to him. Also, I want Prince Shakradeva to be crowned the new king. I am an outsider; after the coronation of Prince Shakradeva, I will return to my homeland.”

Upon hearing my decision, the crowd outside enthusiastically raised slogans and shouted, “Glory to Krishna! Glory to Queen Mother! Glory to Prince Shakradeva!” Naturally, on hearing me out and realising my intent, the Queen was much more calm, composed and happy. This was clearly evident from her expression and her eyes, which were still gazing at me. In any case, I had said what I had to, now it was the Queen’s turn.

And what can I say about her regal manner? She first greeted the gathered crowd and waved out to them. Then, asking the people to remain quiet, she turned to me and said, “I am satisfied with your intentions and all that you have said. But before I continue, I want to know your identity.”

I immediately spoke with humility, “I am Krishna, son of Vasudeva of Mathura.”

For some reason, as soon as she realised who I was, she became completely calm. Not only that, she even blessed me! I truly felt honoured upon receiving her blessings. For, now the danger had been averted completely. This cordiality did not stop here. As soon as the decision to crown Shakradeva was made, the Queen asked the prince to touch my feet and ask for my blessings. I was bursting with pride. Finally, Krishna had become so eminent that now even princes sought his blessings. Since normalcy was fast being restored, I looked with hopeful eyes at Shaivya. Perhaps, she too had become normal. But no; the fire still flashed in her eyes. It was surprising; I was ensuring that Shakradeva

was crowned the King. I was not even trying to gain control over Karvirpur. Then why was she still so furious with me? And she was still so enraged, that she did not even respond to my greeting. I set everything aside and focussed completely on pacifying her. For, I had seen the same kind of fury in the eyes of my aunts after I had killed Kansa. And it was because I had not paid attention to their anger at that time that I was suffering from the terrible malady called Jarasandha even at present. To be honest, I did not want to repeat that mistake. The love of women was beautiful, but their fury... my goodness! What if I failed to calm her rage and she created some new problem for me? To put it in a nutshell, after the bitter experience with my aunts and having drifted about for several months without a refuge, I wanted to save myself from the fury of a woman's revenge at any cost. Normally too, being cautious was in my nature, and besides, it is a sign of intelligence to foresee a problem and avert it before it actually manifests. Shaivya was a princess and moreover, she was particularly beautiful. To attain her love, a thousand kings and princes could compete with each other to fetch my head and present it on a platter! I just did not want to leave without pacifying her.

Anyway, here I was, thinking about all this, and meanwhile, having decided everything, the Queen's caravan had departed. I too greeted the crowd and quietly returned to my room. Now the only task at hand was to calm Shaivya's rage. And with this intent, I went to Shringlava's funeral and also attended the coronation of Shakradeva. I thought, perhaps her anger would subside on seeing me taking so much interest in these proceedings. Not only that, whenever and wherever I ran into her, I would greet her without fail. I would even flash my trademark smile at her at every opportunity. Meaning, I was constantly making efforts to mend bridges from my end. And fortunately, my efforts were now beginning to bear fruit. After Shakradeva's coronation, she certainly seemed to have softened a little. For me, this in itself was a good sign. I stepped up my efforts to pacify her further. If truth be told, I also got Queen Padmavati's support in this. Consequently, I soon succeeded in making her my sister. Shaivya too was content to find an affectionate brother in me in place of the one she had just lost. With that, my work in Karvirpur was done and great trouble had also been averted.

It was now time for us to leave. Now, there was no uncertainty about where to go next. I had fled from Mathura as a deserter in fear of Jarasandha, and now that I had defeated him, I had become a hero. Thus, I wanted to go to Mathura. To tell you the truth, I was yearning to go to Mathura and flaunt myself as a hero. I wished I could fly there. But alas, the queen was not willing to let me go so soon. Not only this, even Shaivya desired that I stayed for some more time.

If the situation had been any different, I would have never refused Shaivya's request, but what could I do? Had I not made it clear? My heart was raring to go to Mathura. Perhaps, my ego was impatient to impress Mathura with stories of my valorous feats. Thus, I made up my mind that we had to leave for Mathura and convinced everyone to grant us permission to leave.

The Queen was so pleased with me, that while leaving, she gifted us a glut of diamonds and other precious stones, twenty chariots and about thirty orderlies. I felt honoured upon receiving this loving gift. Why just the royal palace, all of Karvirpur bid us a very emotional farewell. Many of them even came all the way to the outskirts of Karvirpur to see us off. Getting so much love and respect, and that too in an unknown land, was indeed a matter of honour. And as for me, I did believe that I really deserved it. I was getting this respect because of my great accomplishment. Thus, our journey had begun with this self-energising pride. We left the borders of Karvirpur with about twenty-five chariots and several orderlies. Naturally, bhaiya, Uddhava and I were seated on different chariots, and we had handed the reins of the chariots to the charioteers. Now that we had got the opportunity, why wouldn't we travel in style?!

And what do I say about my nature? The headiness of the honour I had received in Karvirpur had hardly abated, when I began feeling intoxicated at the very thought of the heroes' welcome we would receive upon reaching Mathura. Indeed, the recognition and respect one receives in one's own city has a different charm. And besides, Krishna was no longer an ordinary cowherd boy. First, I had killed Kansa, followed by Panchajanya, then I had forced Jarasandha to retreat from the battlefield, and now, I was also instrumental in the elimination of the evil King Shringlava. This ordinary Kanha from Vrindavan had indeed become the supremely valorous Krishna of Aryavarta! And why just that? Now, we were no longer the poor cowherd boys from Vrindavan either. We were now wealthy gentlemen of Mathura. And, although I did not know much about wealth, I could nevertheless estimate that there was perhaps no one else in Mathura who possessed as much wealth as we did. You might remember that we already had the boundless wealth given to us by Chandak. Then, we had discovered gems and precious stones on the Gomanta Mountain, and now, we also had the treasure gifted to us by Queen Padmavati. Meaning, we had become really wealthy now, and this current journey was also being conducted befitting rich people. A caravan of scores of chariots was riding along with us. Mathura would certainly not chase off such valorous and wealthy gentlemen from its gates; it would be proud to provide us with refuge. It would be forced to give us a grand welcome. In such a case, how could I keep my ego in check? And why did I need to? When I had performed such great feats, what was the harm in

indulging in a little pride over it? In short, for the first time in my life, my ego was divided between the past and the future. On one hand, I was relishing the honour I had received in Karvirpur and on the other, I was dreaming about the hero's welcome that I was about to receive upon reaching Mathura. Honestly speaking, today I was experiencing first-hand, how honour inflates a person's ego. And what was this ego anyway? To describe it one sentence, it was nothing but moving away from the present. And just see, even at this very moment, my mind was vacillating between the honour accorded to me in the past and my expected welcome in the future. For, in the present moment, there was only this journey, but my mind was not paying any attention to that.

I then thought, if my mind doesn't want to focus on the present moment, why not reminisce about the memorable moments of the past? And so, I got immersed in the thoughts of Vrindavan. The love and honour I had received there was immense. What could I say about Vrindavan? The love I got there was of a different level altogether. They had given me as many names as there were shades to my life. It is because of them that I had such a long list of names—I had been called Kanha, Kanhaiya and Krishna right since childhood. Since I was dark-complexioned, some people lovingly called me Shyam. Since I was Nanda's son, I was called *Nandakishore*. Breaking their butter pots had earned me the title of *Matkiphod* and as I stole their butter, they called me *Maakhanchor*! What I mean to say is, there had been no dearth of love and respect in my life ever since childhood. But surprisingly, my ego had never been as inflated as it was right now. Perhaps, it was not able to take in its stride the series of unexpected triumphs I had notched up in such a short time. First, there was the killing of Panchajanya, then I had chased off Jarasandha and also earned boundless wealth followed by the killing of Shringlava. How could an ordinary cowherd boy's pride digest such great achievements?

But for how long could this go on? What was the point of being proud over what I had achieved by my own actions? I immediately awakened my consciousness. 'Hey! You are just an instrument through which these things got done and who knows this better than you? Why should an instrument feel proud? What is the past and what is the future for an instrument? So, save yourself from these two dangerous grinding stones and quickly focus on the present.' So, here I was. But there was a hitch here as well. As soon as I reverted to the present, I first ran my eyes over my caravan. And I was puffed with pride even in the present moment when I saw this long procession of around twenty-five chariots and more than fifty orderlies. Not very long ago, we had fled from Mathura bereft of any refuge, and here we were, returning to Mathura in a magnificent caravan which would put even a prince to shame! However, pride that exists

only in the present moment is not very strong. So, my mind soon became focussed on the journey. First of all, I took the reins of the chariot in my own hands and made bhaiya and Uddhava sit along with me. Now, travelling in style is alright, but a journey can be enjoyed only by riding in the same chariot as your friends, with its reins in your hands. And what more can I say about this journey? As I watched, the rivers, mountains, forests and lakes, all seemed many times more beautiful than before. And then began a long session of bantering and laughing among us which just did not stop. Indeed, the joy of living in the present is beyond comparison. In fact, another name for the present is pleasure. I was unnecessarily getting carried away by my ego and vacillating between the past and the future. I was needlessly spoiling the pleasure of this beautiful journey.

It was such a long and beautiful journey! With numerous chariots, scores of servants and soldiers! And that too, in the company of friends. Neither did we have to keep awake at night, nor did we have to take the horses to drink water. Moreover, we did not even have to arrange for our food. All in all, this was the first journey of our lives in which we were travelling in the grand style of princes. It was the first time we had realised how wonderful a life of comfort was. We were happy, but Uddhava could not even begin to comprehend how we had become so wealthy! The poor fellow had set out in search for us, thinking that we must be starving somewhere. But now he could see the comfort and luxury we were enjoying. Well, this is *Krishna's karmaleela*—the game played by Krishna, which changes everything in the blink of an eye! Take this journey for instance; even the manner in which we were travelling had changed so much. At times, all three of us would sit in one chariot, and when we felt the need to relax, we would sleep in our individual chariots. And yes, wherever we halted for the night, I would invariably launch into a melody on my flute, out of pure joy. And when the haunting tune resonated in the cold, night air, it would invariably awaken fond memories of Vrindavan. How was it possible not to miss Vrindavan during such a peaceful and enjoyable journey? Amazingly, with the mellifluous notes of the flute I could recall Vrindavan with such clarity, that it would almost feel like the present moment! What a carefree and happy life that was! Oh! How I wished I could fly and reach Vrindavan at this very instant!

But the question was, did I need to heed my mind or Nature? Of course, I needed to listen to Nature. At any rate, I had never burdened Nature with my desires, so why would I do it now? Having said that, Nature can determine where we have to live and what we have to do. But who we place in our heart is entirely our choice. And you know very well that taking advantage of this fact, I had never let the memories of Vrindavan fade away from my mind. I had never

allowed them to become my past. And besides, for an action-oriented mind like mine, what was the difference between Vrindavan, Mathura or the Gomanta Mountain? Whether it was Radha or Malini, whoever came before me, I accepted them. I did not get caught up in likes and dislikes. I wholeheartedly enjoyed everything that came my way. I never complained to Nature why it repeatedly pushed a fun-loving, colourful personality and an artist like me, who was fond of music and dance, to fight battles one after another. I never complained why it was forcing this soft-hearted, artistically inclined person to live a life of strife and struggle. No! I embraced life fully, in all its hues. I never differentiated between my discus weapon and my flute. I never made a choice between the two. When Nature gave me the opportunity to play the flute, I happily played it and thanked it for the opportunity. When Nature forced me to use the discus, I did so with the same degree of love, considering it my duty. Despite the fact that I was simple, Nature created circumstances in which I had to become cunning, so I effortlessly became crafty as well, considering it Nature's will. For, I had firm faith in Nature which is running this colossal universe with such precision! It knows our lives and what is good for us, much better than we ourselves do! From its divine perspective, Vrindavan was Nature's own and so was Mathura. Radha was its creation and so was Malini. Similarly, simplicity and cunningness are two attributes which have also been created by Nature. Then who was I to choose? Who was I to be partial to one or the other? It was Nature's will and the task of implementing it was mine. It was neither good nor bad. This is exactly what I repeatedly advised Arjuna much later while enunciating the Bhagavad Gita. I had said, *"Rise above sin and virtue. Discard both while you are still alive and just surrender to Nature's will."*³³

Anyway, let us leave Arjuna aside for now. Our journey was progressing enjoyably. When we sat in the same chariot, we would chatter incessantly. And when we were in separate chariots, I would get lost in contemplation. Our chaperoning was such that we just had to point towards a fruit and the servants would pile the fruits in front of us. Sometimes, when we could not find a rest house and had to sleep in the forest, it was the servants who would make up our bedding with leaves. Of course, as far as buying something was concerned, we ourselves bought whatever we wished, from every new market that we passed through. After all, I wasn't going to wear clothes and jewellery chosen by the servants! To tell you the truth, thanks to my love for clothes and jewellery, I would buy a couple of *Pitambars* from every market that we passed. Why would I suppress my desire to buy things I liked? And when I was not holding myself

back in my pleasure pursuits, why would I be stingy with my dreams? One such day, as I was contemplating, I fell asleep in my chariot after a heavy meal in the afternoon. I had hardly nodded off to sleep when Rukmini appeared before my eyes. Her presence overwhelmed my whole being. I have no qualms in telling you that I got goose pimples all over. Within moments, I was completely lost in Rukmini's thoughts. And where was the harm in this? After all, I had now become worthy enough to dream about Rukmini. Not only was I a great warrior who had chased off Jarasandha, but I was incredibly wealthy too. Moreover, I was now loved not only by the people of Mathura and Vrindavan, but also by the people of Karvirpur and many other kingdoms. To tell you the truth, it was for the first time that I felt that my dream of attaining Rukmini was close to becoming a reality.

Even if this was just wishful thinking on my part, it was amazing. For, this very thought had filled me with immense enthusiasm. And thanks to this, I began to enjoy this princely journey even more. One day, when we stopped to rest for the night, an odd but very significant incident took place. Bhaiya and I were sitting and chatting. Uddhava had gone off to sleep. During a lull in our conversation, we heard the whispering of the soldiers. The soldiers of Queen Padmavati and those of my Uncle were conversing with each other. One of the soldiers said very sadly, "We are soldiers but we do not belong to any unit."

A second one said, "You are absolutely right, friend. But what can we do, that is our fate!"

A third added, "Our situation is quite disgraceful. If someone were to ask us which kingdom we belonged to or what the name of our king was, we would not have an answer."

Hearing this, bhaiya and I were shaken to the core. I went cold all over. What they were saying was true. We had to achieve a lot more than what we had done so far. The heady intoxication of our success evaporated instantly. However, I considered every incident to be a sign from Nature. For, the fact that we were awake and had overheard the soldiers' conversation could not have been just a coincidence. After deliberating on this for a while, I reached the conclusion that beyond doubt, Nature was pointing out that it was high time we found a kingdom of our own. I immediately shared this analysis with bhaiya. I said, "Perhaps this is a sign from Nature that we establish our own kingdom." Upon hearing this, bhaiya began to laugh.

When his laughter stopped, he said very seriously, "Kanhaiya, making a new kingdom is no laughing matter. The main aspects of a kingdom are: land, people, soldiers and finally, wealth. But tell me, if you desired to be a King, why did you refuse the throne of Mathura? We were getting the throne of Karvirpur

as well, why did you not accept it?”

I said, “No, bhaiya. To capture another’s kingdom or to steal someone else’s right to become King is not in our nature. And as for hard work, my experience until now has been that to attain something, a human being does not need to slog as much as he needs to be in sync with the flow of Nature. For, events are going to unfold according to Nature’s plan, the question is whether you can flow with the events or not? Just think, bhaiya! In Vrindavan, we were spending our lives as illiterate and ignorant boys; and look where we have reached today! Tell me, what efforts did we make to achieve all this? What was the role of our intentions in it, or how hard did we work for it? Kansa invited us, and we came to Mathura. Nature created the circumstances because of which we had to kill Kansa. To pay our *gurudakshina* to our teacher, we had to kill Panchajanya. We shot into prominence after killing Kansa and Panchajanya. We not only made Chandak a King, but we were also responsible for the coronation of Shakradeva. Meanwhile, we also managed to accumulate immense wealth. We also chased away Jarasandha, the most powerful King of Aryavarta and overnight, we became the greatest heroes of that region! In short, if you examine our progress carefully, it has been the result of the events which have taken place one after the other. But what did we exactly do to achieve all this? We merely went along with the flow of the events. What I mean to say is, if our own kingdom is slated to be formed sometime in the future, the events too would take place accordingly. We will just have to become the medium through which these events can unfold. And besides, bhaiya, why do you forget that the people of as many as three different kingdoms, Mathura, Vaivasvatpur and Karvirpur now revere us. We are the ones who have saved them from their former cruel rulers like Kansa, Panchajanya and Shringlava. Even these blessings which we constantly receive will help us. Indeed, one day, you will see that these same blessings will suffice for us to establish our own kingdom.”

Now, I do not know whether bhaiya had understood what I had said or not. But if you ever want to progress in life, clearly understand this principle. If you are having trouble understanding it, read it repeatedly; do not be under any illusion. And from now on, allow whatever is happening in your life to happen. Go along with whatever is happening and trust me, that one day, you will certainly reach where you have to.

Anyway, now we were not very far from Mathura. If we wanted to, we could have continued our journey and would have reached Mathura by late night. But does one enter the city so late at night with such a large entourage? How could one lose the opportunity of stunning all of Mathura by making a grand entry in the middle of the day? So, we entered the city the next day, not

early in the morning but just before noon. I was riding my chariot, bhaiya was sitting beside me and Uddhava sat in the rear seat. And a caravan of scores of chariots followed us. Bhaiya and I were sitting proudly with our chests puffed up. After all, the victorious heroes were entering their own city in such a regal manner, like princes. Needless to add, the news of our arrival spread like wildfire across Mathura. In the beginning, whoever saw us was stunned. But gradually, the astonishment turned into a warm welcome. As the news of our arrival spread, a large crowd of people gathered to welcome us. Actually, the news of our routing of Jarasandha's army had reached Mathura and consequently, our valorous feat was the hottest topic of discussion even among children. So, people were bound to crowd around us. Moreover, the caravan which followed us was also attracting a large crowd. Our huge caravan had made the crowd extremely curious. About two hundred people had already started walking along with it. And as the procession moved ahead, the crowd kept swelling too. Gradually, the situation was such that it had become difficult for our caravan to even move ahead. Well, I was not in any hurry either. I did not want this welcome to come to an end. We had left Mathura in utter dismay, so it was natural that the respect we were getting now just did not seem enough. And the swelling crowd seemed to have decided to fulfill this need of ours to the fullest. Now, chants praising us rang across the crowd. We were showered with flowers and garlands. Women marked our foreheads with vermilion to welcome us. How can I describe how elated I was with the welcome that I was receiving from my own city! To tell you the truth, this was precisely the moment that my ego had been waiting for. It had been yearning for long to receive this honour. Indeed, my ego deserved to receive this honour. So, at this time, I had set it free to get bloated as much as it desired to. After all, the poor thing seldom got such opportunities in my presence.

Meanwhile, bhaiya's happiness had to be seen to be believed. It was entirely of a different level altogether. He was completely puffed up with pride. It was natural; after all, he had been protesting against fleeing from the battle only because he was worried about us losing our reputation. But today, on receiving such a grand welcome, he felt really blessed. His ego was soaring to the skies! You know how my heart would dance with joy whenever bhaiya's ego was satiated. Thus, my happiness had now doubled on its own! This was our condition, but in contrast, Uddhava was in a strange plight. Ever since he had met us, the poor boy was dumbfounded on seeing our grandeur, the servants, soldiers and our caravan of chariots. And now, on seeing our grand welcome, his head seemed to be reeling with bewilderment. Even better than that, on seeing our grand reception, the complaints of our coterie of soldiers had also vanished.

In fact, they were bursting with a sense of pride on seeing the manner in which we were being welcomed. They had realised that though their masters were no kings, they were no less than any King as far as honour and grandeur were concerned. And they were not wrong in thinking that. In short, even though I did not have a kingdom of my own, I certainly ruled the hearts of many people in several different kingdoms.

Gradually, our arrival in Mathura was taking on the form of a victory march. About five hundred people were walking along with our chariots and following them as we proceeded through the streets of Mathura. And as the chariots passed through my favourite haunt, the main marketplace, a marvellous shower of flowers and garlands greeted us. People had climbed atop the verandas of shops to get a glimpse of their heroes. The crowd had grown so much that now there was no place even to stand. The caravan had all but stopped. And the best thing of all was that even Malini had arrived, dressed in finery. I was extremely pleased on seeing her. She applied the mark of victory on my forehead with her own hand and garlanded me. I too jumped down from my chariot and walked up to her veranda. Seeing this, she had become extremely pleased and even felt proud. And why would she not be? Her friend had returned after accomplishing several feats of valour. On top of that, after returning, it was to her that he had accorded the most respect. And her friend, meaning I, was currently at the peak of his glory. Truly, this welcome that Mathura had given us was now etched in my mind forever. Even though we had received a similar reception in Karvirpur, my ego had not bloated to this extent. Perhaps, the ego becomes more powerful among one's own people.

Well, finally, our welcome ceremony came to an end, but because of this, we reached the palace only by evening. Grandfather, naturally, was waiting for us impatiently. He too had made splendid arrangements for our grand reception. It was only after this official, royal reception that we entered the palace. As soon as we were inside, grandfather first congratulated us on our impressive victory. But the very next moment, for some reason, his eyes welled up with tears. After all, he loved me a lot, and besides, considering the situation in which I had left Mathura, the past one year must have been very hard on him. Naturally, he was bound to be moved to tears upon seeing my progress and on hearing about my valorous feats. In fact, even I had become misty-eyed on seeing him after a whole year. How could I forget that the entire credit for my bravery and progress went to the encouragement that he had showered upon me from time to time? Needless to say, both of us, grandfather and grandson, had dinner together. We spoke for a long time; in fact, I wanted to keep chatting with him all night, but the treasure piled in the chariots did not permit this. Also, my eyes were

beginning to close out of sheer exhaustion. Thus, after talking with him for a while, I had to seek his permission to leave. Yes, but I must mention that bhaiya had chosen to stay back at the palace on grandfather's insistence. But that was fine by us, so Uddhava and I soon reached home.

The moment we reached home, we found that the reception was not over as yet, for mother and father too gave us a warm welcome and greeted their brave son. Mother could not contain the pride she felt at her son's achievements. Having a valorous son like me had certainly overcome her pain of losing her seven children. However, at this point in time, my top priority was to take care of the treasure that I had brought along. So, first of all, Uddhava and I lifted the treasure chests and kept them safely in my chamber. At the same time, I selected four of the most diligent of my soldiers and instructed them to start guarding the house with immediate effect. I sent the remaining chariots and soldiers back to the royal palace. I had not even freed myself from all these tasks when mother called us for dinner. I had already feasted with grandfather, but I did not think it right to refuse mother and hurt her. She had not yet eaten, as she was waiting for me, and besides, what did it matter to a glutton like me if I had two meals back to back? But let me tell you one thing; this was my first experience of having a meal so late at night. Actually, no matter how many sumptuous meals you may have enjoyed, they are no match for food cooked and served by your mother. Now, just imagine the plight I must have been in, after feasting twice and that too when I was completely exhausted! Of course, I was fast asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow.

Naturally, it was late in the afternoon by the time I woke up. After a good night's sleep, not only was my mind refreshed but physically too, I felt ready to take on the world. I immediately got dressed and went to meet grandfather at the royal palace. Grandfather and I got along well together; besides, as I had said earlier, I owed my current position solely to him. So, I was yearning to talk to him for some time. But when I reached there, I was dumbfounded. Grandfather's, meaning, King Ugrasena's expression bore no semblance to the happy visage I had seen yesterday. On the contrary, it was furrowed with anxiety. Perhaps, he had other worries apart from Jarasandha. So, I thought, let me find out all about them. When I asked him, he told me about the cause of his anxiety in great detail. He told me that business in Mathura was in a shambles. As a consequence, Mathura's coffers were empty. The circumstances were so bad that for the past three months, the palace employees had not even been paid their wages. Moreover, most of the Yadava leaders kept squabbling with each other. As if this was not enough, Satrajit had permanently moved to Mathura. And for some unknown reason or because of some agenda, he was instigating the Yadava

leaders against the royal palace on a regular basis. And by now, he was actually making headway with his malicious plans. He had instigated many powerful Yadavas, including Satyaki, and turned them against the royal palace. And since he had been vehemently opposing me right from the beginning, grandfather feared that now that I was back in Mathura, he might create some trouble for the palace.

However, to tell you the truth, I did not find the situation to be as grave as grandfather believed it to be. Or perhaps I felt this way, because I had only a little knowledge of administrative affairs. Nevertheless, after giving it some thought, I asked grandfather, "If things are as you say they are, why do you not counter-attack these rebelling factions of Yadavas, especially Satrajit? Why don't you ask for their help in replenishing the treasury?" Grandfather shook his head sadly and replied, "What do I say, Kanhaiya? Satrajit is the most influential of all the Yadavas. He has a magical gem called the Syamantaka, which gives him several grams of gold every day. This constant inflow of gold has made him so wealthy, that he has even set up a small kingdom somewhere near Saurashtra. Not only does he have abundant wealth, but he also has hundreds of soldiers. It is because of all this that he exerts such influence over all the Yadava leaders. I do not know why he is so interested in Mathura despite having his own kingdom. Incidentally, not just in Mathura, but Yadavas in many other kingdoms also consider him their leader. Indeed, the main reason behind this is that he is the richest Yadava in Aryavarta. All in all, his malicious meddling in the affairs of Mathura can have grave consequences at any time. You are suggesting that I take his help to replenish the treasury, while he has been instigating everybody not to pay their taxes! He is spreading the news that neither is the royal palace capable of protecting Mathura, nor are they prospering in their business. He is also telling them that no new construction is taking place in Mathura and all the parks and gardens have become barren. So, why pay taxes to the royal palace?"

Well, I left the royal palace after having heard all that grandfather had to say and sympathising with him. But for the next several days, my mind remained preoccupied with what he had told me. Leave alone living peacefully, I was now sinking in a whirlpool of restlessness. For I had understood the matter thoroughly after grandfather had explained the situation in detail to me. Not only was Satrajit the most powerful of all the Yadavas, but he had no dearth of wealth either. But perhaps he was not content with his small kingdom. Therefore, he was increasing his influence in Mathura and creating these conflicts to fulfill his ambitions. And clearly, he had succeeded in creating a parallel kingdom of his own in Mathura. Perhaps, he intended to hand over the reins of Mathura to an acolyte of his. In such a case, I would certainly prove to be an obstruction to his

evil intentions. For, not only was I loyal to grandfather, but I was powerful as well. This meant that his opposition was not personal, it was all a part of an elaborate strategy. It was only now that I had clearly understood why he had always opposed me. And seen from this perspective, Satrajit's intentions were truly dangerous. This could not only lead to Mathura's downfall, but it could also compel me once again to run helter-skelter without refuge. Admittedly, the troubles that were brewing were at the initial stage, but their consequences could be extremely grave. For, if Mathura were to slip from grandfather's hands, it would be impossible for me to withstand Jarasandha's onslaughts. After thinking about it all for a while, I realised that there was only one solution to this problem. I had to take Satrajit head on and increase my influence over the Yadavas.

I thought, this would be accomplished in due course, but what about the immediate crisis at the royal palace? What about the pathetic condition of the royal coffers? I too had enough wealth. I too could help the royal palace. But if I did that, I would become weak. Indeed, with that, my long-term goal of becoming wealthier and more powerful than Satrajit would remain a pipe dream, whereas my main aim was to win over the Yadavas and foil Satrajit's evil designs. Did you see, how Nature invariably created one trouble after another for me, whether I liked it or not? I had been in Mathura for no more than a day, and I had thought that now I could enjoy my days in Mathura since there was no more danger from the menace called Jarasandha and no shortage of wealth and honour either. I had even thought that I would find time to peacefully visit Vrindavan and would bring everybody for a tour of Mathura. But I had forgotten that Nature just did not want me to lead a peaceful life. But I did not care; Nature could do as it wished. Still, for me, there was one good thing about today's development. I suddenly realised something new: if one possessed wealth, one could indeed become a King like Satrajit. Meaning, it was not necessary to belong to a royal lineage to become King. And if this was true, it meant that my beloved Rukmini was just a few steps away from coming into my life. Now you tell me, what better news could there be for me than this?

Soon, I was lost in thoughts of having a kingdom of my own and that in turn gave birth to fresh anxiety. We had quite a lot of wealth, but perhaps it was not yet enough to establish a kingdom of our own. How was I to find more? Neither did we have a permanent, income-generating business, nor did we have any gem like the Syamantaka, which could magically provide us a heap of gold each and every day. Whatever wealth we had was what had been given to us in gratitude for my valour. Meaning, even today, dreaming was one thing but to turn dreams into reality was a different game altogether. So, I wisely set myself

free from these thoughts for now. Setting up a kingdom and gaining wealth was in the future, and the future has never been under anyone's control. At present, there was only Satrajit and the problems created by him to worry about. So, it was better to focus on that. And anyway, the future is not dependent on thinking, planning or dreaming about it, but instead, it is the present that builds your future. And the present was perfectly clear; if Satrajit was successful in his plans, then forget about establishing our own kingdom, we would not be able to find refuge in any other kingdom either. So, I snapped out of my dreams and determinedly, got down to the tasks that lay ahead. But what could I do? Not only my dreams, but even my life now depended on the outcome of this new struggle.

In a way, this struggle was completely different from all the previous ones I had encountered. This time, neither did I have to fight Satrajit nor kill him. I merely had to make a better impression on the Yadavas than he had created. And as far as the Yadavas were concerned, it was clear that considering the condition in which we were when we had left Mathura, the valorous feats which we had achieved before returning had already increased our influence many times over. Chasing Jarasandha off had established the fact that we were valorous; and whatever else was lacking could be accomplished by announcing that we were now wealthy. Not only the Yadavas, but the entire world bowed down before wealth and power. The fact was, Satrajit could not compete with us as far as strength was concerned; and as for his wealth, well, now we too had become quite affluent. Oh! We are back to where we had started. Meaning, whatever was in the interest of Mathura was in our interest too. Just as it was in mine as well as Mathura's interest that power remained in the hands of grandfather, it was in both our interests that I remained wealthy and powerful. Is it not said that whatever benefits everyone else is good for us too? As a matter of fact, how could that which benefits others ever be different from that which benefits us? After all, 'we' too are a part of 'all.' Take my example; I always rose above my selfish interest and thought of the larger interest, whether it was killing the Kaaliya serpent or vanquishing Keshi, stopping the worship of Indra, or starting the practice of worshipping Govardhana. All this was in Vrindavan's interest. There was not even a hint of self-interest in any of these actions. And just see, all these actions not only benefitted Vrindavan, but they also established the foundation of my becoming valorous and established my reputation as a brave warrior across the entire Aryavarta. Similarly, whether it was the elimination of Panchajanya or Shringlava, what selfish interest did I have in killing them? On the contrary, I had put my life at stake in both the cases. But thereafter, both these events had helped us acquire immense wealth. What I

mean to say is, if I too had thought only of my self-interest, I would probably have still been playing hide-and-seek and tag with the cowherd boys in Vrindavan. So, why don't you too rise above your self-interest and start thinking in the interest of all?

Oh well, what you do is up to you; for now, let me move ahead with my story. Since the past several years, I had anyway been nurturing the desire to become wealthy. Moreover, becoming wealthy was extremely important for attaining the love of my life, Rukmini! Fortunately, there were clear signs that Nature too was willing to grant me my desire. This was so because what was earlier only in my interest or that of my love, was now also in the interest of Mathura. And when self-interest converges with the larger good, that is precisely what is considered to be Nature's will. Indeed, now that self-interest was aligned with the common good of all, why should I delay? My mind immediately engaged in an undeclared confrontation with Satrajit. And the first thought that occurred to me was that if I was anathema to Satrajit, it meant that he certainly was not pleased with my valorous deeds, such as my recent routing of Jarasandha's formidable army, or my killing of Shringlava. Then why not launch a formal battle against him by provoking him to react to my recent heroics? But to defeat an opponent, it was important to get close to him and understand him, especially for people like me, who fought political battles.

Thinking on these lines, one day, for no apparent reason, I suddenly hopped onto my chariot and went over to Satrajit's palace, all by myself. Now naturally, two opposites can never meet easily. One of the two invariably has to take the initiative. So, I thought I might as well go and give it a try. Satrajit's mansion looked more like a royal palace. I was stunned by its opulence. But that was not all. As soon as I entered the mansion, I was pleasantly surprised. The door was opened by a beautiful maiden who was about twelve or thirteen years old. I certainly did not expect to get such a beautiful welcome at my enemy's door! Actually, she was Satrajit's daughter, Satyabhama. She was very beautiful, dignified and calm, and yet playful and vivacious. To be honest with you, compelled by my nature, I could not help being bowled over by her. But that was not the end of the matter. I instantly turned on my charm to full power and, deploying my most magical smile, introduced myself. Surprisingly, even now I was standing outside the door, while she was still inside. What came as a bigger surprise was that when she came to know who I was, myriad expressions of surprise wafted across her attractive face. I was astonished, for this meant that she had heard about me. And then, that was not all; extremely excited, now she immediately took me straight to the meeting room of the palace. She kept walking ahead, and I kept following her. The mansion appeared to be no less

than a palace, not only from the outside, but even from the inside. Every object inside the mansion emphasised its opulence. This splendid mansion with its luxurious interiors suddenly made me realise that no matter how much I praised myself, there obviously was still a very large gap between Satrajit and me, as far as wealth was concerned. Funnily enough, Satyabhama was as astonished to see me as I was to see the splendour of the mansion. Still, she soon composed herself and in a refined manner, offered me a seat. And then she served me a cool and refreshing drink of rose sherbet which I drank with great pleasure. As soon as she had served me, she sat down on a seat opposite to me, with her legs crossed. And out of sheer force of habit, even while drinking the sherbet, I could not resist looking up and stealing glances at her. Well, she was no less smart; she kept gazing at me intently. This went on for quite some time. Finally, it was Satyabhama who broke the silence. In a demure voice, she said, "I have heard a lot about your glorious deeds. I used to think that you were a middle-aged man. But I am quite surprised how you could accomplish all those valorous feats at such a young age! In fact, I am in awe of you."

Now, what could I tell her! I too was immensely impressed with her. There was demureness as well as confidence in the way she spoke. Moreover, she was about ten years younger than me. To tell you the truth, Satyabhama's condition was exactly similar to the plight I was in, when I had seen Radha for the first time. The only difference was that Radha was much older than me and I was much older than Satyabhama. So, what? The roles had changed, but the story was the same. In this relationship, Satyabhama was Krishna, and I was playing the role of Radha. After chatting for a while, Satyabhama asked me the reason for my visit. Oh! I was so stupefied by her beauty, that I had forgotten the very reason why I had visited the palace! I had forgotten Satrajit and had instead got captivated by Satyabhama. A voice within chided me, 'O my dear Krishna! Learn to behave yourself, will you? Be serious, for once!' Then I thought, why be serious? You tell me, is there a greater curse than to be solemn in this world? Can there be a greater boon for a human being than pure joy? Actually, our heart is like an exotic garden in which we should keep planting a variety of beautiful flowers of joy, whenever we get the opportunity. To lead a drab life, devoid of pleasure, is the biggest disgrace to human life. Take me, for instance. I used to make the most of even the smallest moments of joy. As such, no one could surpass me when it came to grabbing every opportunity to enjoy and celebrate. In fact, no matter what kind of life one leads, it is necessary to enjoy every opportunity that you get to be happy to the fullest. And this is especially true for one leading a life like mine, which was filled with an unending series of strife, struggle and pain, where moments of peace and pleasure seldom arrived. Now, if

I were to let these moments go by, what would be left to live for?

Anyway, right now, Satyabhama was waiting to know my reason for visiting her place. So, as soon as my thought process ended, I disclosed the reason for my visit to Satyabhama, "I have come to meet your father, Satrajit."

"But he is not at home at present," she replied.

"Oh well, it does not matter. I can come later," I replied. "I did not have any specific work with him. I came merely to pay him a courtesy call."

With this brief exchange of words there was a momentary lull in our conversation, but from Satyabhama's conduct, it was plainly evident that she was as captivated on seeing me as I had been on seeing Radha. Even so, there was a fundamental difference between the two situations. I had lost my composure upon seeing Radha, whereas, Satyabhama appeared in complete charge of her emotions. Perhaps, this was merely the difference between a blundering cowherd boy and a sophisticated city girl. That is why when I got up to leave, she was able to say very calmly, "Very well! Do come to visit us again."

The way in which she spoke stopped me midway for a moment; I could not help but turn my head and look at her, but then I smiled and went my way. Now, I wonder what spell this act of mine cast on her, that not only did she come to see me off till the door, but she even kept gazing at me till my chariot was well out of sight. This was my first, short and sweet meeting with Satyabhama, but despite this, it had taken on the form of a memorable meeting. Oh well! Coming back to Satrajit, and looking at this visit from that perspective, he had anyway launched a campaign against me already, and now, through this memorable meeting with Satyabhama, I too had demonstrated my readiness. I was now waiting for his reaction.

But Satrajit was a seasoned player. Even after a week had passed, he did not try to find out even once why I had come to visit him. But yes, after that, he certainly increased the intensity of his political attacks on me and the royal palace. In response, I too had begun some weird manoeuvres against him through the palace. And to tell you the truth, within a month, this undeclared battle between Satrajit and me created a stressful atmosphere in Mathura. And, even though most of the Yadava elite and the Yadava leaders were with Satrajit, it was I who was the apple of the common people's eyes. As a result, this tug of war promised a lot of fun.

Moreover, all this had also upset my daily routine. But yes, I regularly went for a walk in the morning. Also, I would go to the palace every day to share grandfather's sorrows. At other times, I would wander around on my own. On the other hand, bhaiya was just not concerned about what was happening in Mathura. However, Uddhava, at times, would certainly try to understand the

situation after listening to the discussions between grandfather and me. Seeing his receptiveness regarding these matters, I would sometimes discuss this topic with him too. And yes, whenever I got the chance, I did not fail to go over to Malini's house to spend a few moments of peace. However, even amidst all these activities, my mind remained preoccupied with Satrajit. And after thinking at length about him, I could clearly see that Satrajit owed his dominance and power solely to the Syamantaka gem. And the important thing was, he himself had no significant part to play in his meteoric rise. He had not earned it but had acquired it by sheer chance. It was not the fruit of his own labour, so he did not deserve to be treated with respect. As soon as this thought crossed my mind, a thousand questions rose in my mind concerning the right to own the Syamantaka gem. To cut a long story short, after I had this thought, I could not digest the idea of Satrajit having the sole right to this wonderful gem. Just as nobody could claim a monopoly over the sun, moon, air, rivers and mountains, nobody could claim their sole right to the Syamantaka gem because it was also a gift of Nature. This was absolutely clear in my mind. Just as all inhabitants of Mathura had an equal right to the River Yamuna, they had to have an equal right to the Syamantaka gem as well. And this could best be accomplished if the gem was declared to be the kingdom's property.

To sum it up, my thinking these days was going in the right direction on its own. For, if what I was thinking about could be accomplished, all of Mathura's problems would be resolved easily. First of all, this would immediately improve the pitiable state of the royal coffers. Secondly, it would surely take me time to become as powerful as Satrajit, but with this one move, it was possible to lower Satrajit's status in no time. Once the gem was taken away, he would instantly lose his status. After all, his influence and leadership over the Yadavas was not due to his power or his nature; it was all solely due to the Syamantaka gem. Thus, if the gem was taken away from him, who would even turn around to look at him? And once he was off the arena, the Yadavas would remain only under my influence. In short, with a single arrow, I could shoot down many targets. Meaning, I just had to use this arrow. But how would I do it? Separating the gem from Satrajit was like taking his soul out of his body. So, what? When the task was for the good of all, a way to execute it just had to be found. So, deep within, I was becoming increasingly determined to somehow wrest the gem from Satrajit.

It was good that I was determined, but finding a solution to this problem was not that easy. Thus, my visits to the banks of the Yamuna and my flute-playing had become very frequent. Doing so was harmless, but thanks to the repeated visits to the Yamuna, a desire to live near the river arose in my heart.

Well, this was a great wish. Now we did not lack wealth, so I thought, why not enjoy our lives and do what we wished to? Life, after all, was not just about struggling. Naturally, pleasure, joy and rest are its primary needs. With this thought, I decided to build a house on the banks of the Yamuna. This decision had turned out to be good, but now, another trouble came knocking at my door. Uddhava was very unhappy in Mathura. He would repeatedly badger me and bhaiya to return to Vrindavan. I too wanted to go back, but I did not want to go there half-heartedly. But then, how could I make Uddhava understand? So, I patiently apprised him of Satrajit's evil designs and of the sad state of affairs in the royal palace. I explained to him that if I left Mathura, Satrajit's accomplices would tighten their grip on the palace. I also told him that Satrajit's increasing influence over the royal palace was not at all good for Mathura. Besides, it was not good to leave grandfather alone under such conditions. It would not be good for my future either. Finally, in order to pacify Uddhava and to reassure the *Vrindavanwasis*, I decided to send bhaiya along with Uddhava. However, this was certain to enrage the gopis. Naturally, they would think that if Balarama could come back, why not Krishna? Perhaps, this would reinforce my image as a trickster and a selfish person; but you know very well that I never bothered about such things. So, I immediately informed bhaiya and Uddhava of my decision. Needless to say, both of them jumped with joy on hearing this and they immediately began to make preparations. I was content that they would bring me news about everybody in Vrindavan and at the same time, tell them about my great, valorous deeds. Of course! I especially asked them to tell my dear Radha about my deeds.

Now, look what happened! As soon as they got down to packing their things, I got lost in thoughts of Vrindavan. In fact, I even imagined their reactions to my valorous deeds. Radha... she could barely contain her pride when she heard about her Kanhaiya's exploits. My parents, the gopas and gopis were all dancing with joy! But yes, everybody was sad that I had not been able to come. However, Uddhava was trying his best to explain my helplessness to them. Everybody else was satisfied with the explanation, but Radha and the gopis were not ready to listen to any reason whatsoever. Poor Uddhava! I burst out laughing on seeing his condition, and that shattered my beautiful dream. And I again found myself standing in Mathura, where Uddhava and bhaiya stood in front of me, ready to leave for Vrindavan. And before I could realise it, they had already left. No sooner had they gone than my mind got lost in thinking about Uddhava. At present, he was the only person because of whom I was still connected to Vrindavan. Did you see, the very thought of Vrindavan would thrill me to the core of my being. My heart wished that I could once again roam all

over Vrindavan barefoot. But every little wish does not necessarily get fulfilled. After all, time, place and circumstances also play a major role in it. In this way, I comforted myself, but thoughts of Vrindavan refused to leave me. Indeed, Uddhava was very fortunate that he could go there whenever he wanted to and could come to Mathura too, whenever he wished. My mind was occupied with these thoughts, because at this time, I was possessed by an intense desire to go to Vrindavan. Honestly, I had never felt such an intense longing to go there before. I wanted to take scores of chariots with plenty of good clothes for everybody, and race to Vrindavan and show them their Kanhaiya's present status. Perhaps, I had this intense desire to go there precisely to show them my grandeur. Whatever it was, the fact remained that I could not go to Vrindavan.

Another fact was, that after the two had left, I was lost in the memories of my dear Vrindavan to such an extent that I began staying aloof from everyone. I would go to the banks of the Yamuna and sit gazing for hours together at our house which was under construction; and as soon as I found some solitude, I would start playing my flute. But how long could all this last? I soon overcame this sadness too. But I had still not got over Vrindavan. Curiosity had now replaced sorrow. I now yearned to know how Radha and Mother Yashoda were and what their actual reaction to my valorous feats was. As you know, Radha's reaction especially mattered to me. For, it was Radha's love which had turned me into a valorous hero. Whatever I was today, was only because of her. So, it was natural that I was extremely eager to know her reaction. And this eagerness led me to feel a different kind of impatience. My mind was fully occupied in awaiting the return of bhaiya and Uddhava. Fortunately, at about the same time, another wait came to an end. The house that was being constructed on the banks of the River Yamuna was finally ready. It had a fine garden right next to the river. The gurgling sound of the flowing river brought peace to my heart. Amidst such a beautiful setting, with the river coursing by its side, this was truly the house of my dreams.

To add to it, the good news was that bhaiya had returned from Vrindavan. But Uddhava had not as yet returned. No matter, I could wait to know the reactions of the people of Vrindavan, especially the gopis. I had to wait because I could not ask bhaiya about the gopis' reaction, could I? But yes, I definitely felt reassured with the news that my parents were well. So, forgetting Vrindavan, I became lost in our house built on the riverside. Every evening, bhaiya and I would go there, and I would lose myself in the sweet melody of my flute, while bhaiya would get involved with sipping wine. On several occasions, we even spent the night there. Once we had this house, our mundane and drab existence in Mathura suddenly came to life. I was feeling really proud of my decision to

build this house. Many a times, father and mother also came here to stay with us. I even had the privilege of receiving grandfather in this house, a couple of times. Now, though we were having fun here, it did not mean that the threat of Satrajit had been averted. He refused to stop his machinations and political manoeuvring. He was creating newer problems for the royal palace every day. Well, so what? Amidst all this fun and frolic, I too had hatched a plan to deal with him. Now, I was just waiting for the opportune moment.

Chapter 9

My First-Ever Meeting With The Pandavas

Time was flitting by, as I waited for the right moment to retaliate against Satrajit. But do things ever occur according to one's wishes? Before I could put pressure on Satrajit, I got caught up in another task. No, no, this one did not present any kind of threat; on the contrary, it turned out to be one of life's unexpected pleasures. It so happened, that just a few days after Uddhava had gone to Vrindavan, Kunti, my aunt from Hastinapur, came to visit father with her five sons, the Pandavas. All of them were in the same age group as we were. Now, since we had guests at home and that too, of our own age, I was naturally

thrilled. You know that I, especially, was very fond of friends who were of my own age. And ever since I had left Vrindavan, I had been yearning for such friends. I had not been able to make even a single close friend in Mathura. Indeed, here it was only grandfather who was my friend, mentor and guide. Yes, at the *ashram*, I certainly had been able to enjoy the company of friends for a short while. To tell you the truth, friendship in my life was as important as love. Perhaps, this was the reason why I missed Vrindavan every now and then. Thus, when these five brothers arrived, my life suddenly became vibrant. All five of them appeared to be very refined, educated and gifted. And with such friends around, you tell me, why would I now be bothered with Satrajit?

Anyway, allow me to introduce my five new friends to you. The eldest was Yudhishthira, who appeared very wise and grave. He was older to me by four or five years. The second was Bhima, who was muscular and extremely strong. The third was Arjuna, who was approximately my age. He had a bow slung on his shoulder. And then there were Sahadeva and Nakula, both of whom were younger than me. They seemed very poised and intelligent. After just a day or two, we had all become very close to each other. Actually, most of the conversations took place between Bhima, Arjuna and me. The others would just stick to 'yes' and 'no.' You may not believe it, but in just a few days, we had become the best of friends. We were cousins, but because we were all about the same age, we naturally became good friends too. Even so, there was one thing which constantly inhibited our fun. Because of the presence of elders in the house, we, and especially bhaiya, was unable to fully enjoy our new friendship. I had already started getting along well with the Pandavas, but bhaiya could not gel with them so easily. Bhaiya did like their company, but he could not keep away from his wine. This was the only reason for his silence. It was only because the Pandavas had come to visit father, that bhaiya was forced to stay at home, else he would have been living at the royal palace. And the reason why bhaiya had been living there was that he could drink freely at the palace! Thus, to assuage bhaiya's sorrow and to enjoy our friendship with our new friends to the fullest, I took them all away with me to stay at our house on the banks of the River Yamuna. There was no dearth of servants and neither did we lack chariots. In fact, it was only now that the chariots and servants given to us by Queen Padmavati were being fully utilised.

So, loading our luggage in five chariots, we set off for the river. We arrived at our home near the river with our caravan of servants, soldiers and chariots, but as soon as we reached there, we realised that there was one thing which was lacking at our home. The home was actually quite small and also quite ill-equipped in terms of facilities. We had never thought that we would

ever stay back here at night with friends. All in all, here we had two spaces; one was a large room and the other, was a small veranda with two swings facing the garden. But what difference did it make? The freedom we had here was much more desirable than a few creature comforts. Needless to say, bhaiya was thrilled with the very decision of coming here. By evening, he had even made arrangements for the wine. Now there was no point in waiting! As soon as evening set in, we settled down in the garden where we all sat on the soft grass. When one is in the company of friends, what difference does it make whether one sits on the ground or a pedestal? As for the garden, it was right by the Yamuna which gently flowed past. We could clearly hear the gurgling sounds of the flowing water. All in all, there could not be a better place than this to spend time with friends. But the mood really caught on when, on a signal from bhaiya, the servants began serving us wine. Even Bhima's and Arjuna's faces had lit up on seeing the wine. These two brothers also seemed to be really fond of wine. In contrast, Yudhishtira, Nakula, Sahadeva were content with taking just a sip every now and then. It soon became a wonderful sight to behold. When the food was served, Bhima quit drinking, but Arjuna and bhaiya kept on drinking along with their food and even after the meal. To my delight, after consuming a few glasses of wine, bhaiya found his voice and was now a part of the conversation. Earlier, it was only I who was doing all the talking. Now bhaiya, Bhima and Arjuna too began to participate actively in the conversation. Obviously, this could be attributed more to the wine than to them. But yes, Yudhishtira, Nakula and Sahadeva had been quiet since the beginning and still remained silent. Now, even though some were reserved while others were talkative, everyone was thoroughly enjoying themselves.

Indeed, as long as one feels free, it does not matter whether one is in a palace or a hut. After all, what exactly is pleasure? It is just another name for the unfettered flights of the mind. Discipline and rules are the main impediments to these flights. And look, this is why such a jovial atmosphere was created when we found this freedom, that it continued even after dinner and carried on well into the night. Amidst this mood of light-hearted banter, I do not know what thought suddenly struck Arjuna, that he gave the conversation a serious turn and addressing me directly, he said, "You are a great hero; you have killed powerful kings like Kansa, Panchajanya and Shringlava."

I responded by saying, "All of you too do not seem to be any lesser heroes."

Now I had just said a simple thing, but on hearing this Bhima boiled with anger. Very angrily, he began, "What heroes? The whole world knows that we are the brothers of the Kauravas. We are princes too. Actually, we are the ones

who are the true heirs to the throne of Hastinapur. But we are still living there like refugees!”

When I heard it, I was extremely surprised and asked, “Why is that?”

And I was even more surprised when Yudhishtira silenced him before Bhima could continue. Frankly speaking, I did not like Yudhishtira silencing Bhima in this manner. It meant that he still considered me and bhaiya as outsiders. Of course, by then, Arjuna had already revealed to us quite a bit about Yudhishtira’s nature. And I had become uneasy, especially upon hearing the tales of his steadfastness. Actually, I was always suspicious of people who were strict about adhering to ethics and principles. It is a proven fact that they are not close to anybody. Besides, I had a distinct dislike for moral codes and principles. Thus, it did not seem that I would get along too well with Yudhishtira. So, I too did not continue this topic anymore, and the matter ended there. Soon, it was time to go to sleep and everyone was feeling sleepy too. So, this beautiful session ended here for that day. Arjuna and I slept in the veranda; I liked sleeping in the open anyway. Bhaiya and Bhima slept in one of the bedrooms and Yudhishtira, Nakula and Sahadeva slept in the other. So, though the house was small, it had accommodated all of us nicely.

Thereafter, from the next day, we started frolicking so much, that it became our daily routine. Now, we would wake up in the morning and dash to the Yamuna for a bath. Then we would exercise, after which we would go out for a stroll. We would roam the marketplaces of Mathura all day and eat all kinds of delicious food. Here, I have to mention that Bhima’s prodigious appetite had impressed me no end. He ate as much as all of us put together! Bhaiya, Arjuna and I too had healthy appetites, but ours paled in comparison to that of Bhima. Furthermore, Bhima also seemed to be the most straightforward among all the brothers. Whereas Arjuna’s oratory skills were far more superior. And as for Yudhishtira, he and I had almost nothing in common. In fact, even from the manner in which he ate, it seemed as if he was doing us a favour by eating! I wonder if these purist types are the ones who become egoistic, or is it that the egoists turn into purists.

Leaving that for now, let me talk about our fun-filled days. One day, Bhima was good-naturedly blowing his own trumpet about his valour. All of us were sitting outside in the garden. Bhima, bhaiya, Nakula and Sahadeva were sitting on the grass, while Arjuna and I were seated on the swing. Seeing us, Yudhishtira also occupied the other swing for himself. To tell you the truth, the mood at present seemed to be even more cheerful than what it was the previous day. Bhima seemed to be a bit too chirpy at the moment. Without any prodding or provocation, he was boasting of his prowess with the mace and telling us

slightly exaggerated stories of his own heroism. We did not have any problem with that, but bhaiya could not tolerate these tall stories for long. Firstly, like Bhima, he too was an expert fighter with the mace and besides, you are well acquainted with bhaiya's ego. Now you tell me, for how long could bhaiya tolerate such boasting? So, he immediately jumped into the fray to vent out his irritation. Needless to say, the argument soon became heated, and the effect of the wine was visible too. We, of course, did not intervene; on the contrary, we were rather enjoying the heated argument. However, there was one fundamental difference in the way the two were speaking. While Bhima still spoke naturally, bhaiya's words were clearly tainted by ego. It was indeed this simplicity of Bhima that had made me an instant fan of his. However, coming back to the present, the discussion had taken such an interesting turn, that both were trying to recollect incidents of their valour and narrating them. Then suddenly, bhaiya lost his patience and challenged Bhima to a fight. Bhima was only too glad to accept the challenge. And why would they wait once they had decided to demonstrate their strengths? Immediately, they both got up to fight. We were merely the spectators. And you know that it is the spectators who enjoy themselves the most in such situations. But right at this moment, this had a sad side to it as well. Actually, night had fallen, and it was dinnertime. Our stomachs were growling with hunger. Perhaps, if this tussle had not erupted, dinner would have already been served by now. But no matter; if our stomachs were suffering in hunger, at least we were getting to watch a fine drama.

So, this ache was only momentary! While I was lost in thinking about food, the duo had already come out, clad in loincloths, with their maces. Naturally, the fight was to take place in the garden. Seeing that the mood was set, we too jumped off our swings and began to settle ourselves in the adjoining veranda. Surprisingly, we had not even managed to fold our knees, and the fight had already begun. I cannot tell you how thrilling the scene was! On one hand, the cool weather had made the atmosphere quite pleasant, and on the other, the flowing Yamuna was adding to the beauty. And now, between the Yamuna and us, this glorious duel with the mace had begun. All of us were enjoying ourselves thoroughly. Both the warriors were evenly matched, and the fight was going on well. The mood was such that whenever either of the two made a good move, we would cheer for them. The fight went on and on, but there was no winner or loser. On the other hand, this fight had one benefit. After this, both became the best of friends. This was the second time in my life that I was seeing such an excellent duel with the mace. You might recall that earlier, I had also had the good fortune of watching a mace-fight between bhaiya and Jarasandha. Actually, bhaiya's skill with his mace and his speed was marginally better than

Bhima's. For that matter, I was inordinately proud of bhaiya's skill at fighting and his unbridled courage. Anyway, for now, the important thing was that as the two of them had become good friends, the enjoyment was also bound to increase; and the biggest proof of this was that after the fight had ended, everyone ate to their heart's content.

Needless to say, the next day there was more fun and frolic. All day, we rode our chariots all around Mathura. We feasted on delicious food from numerous shops. Our condition was such that by the time it was evening, we had to search for ways to help digest the great quantity of food that we had gorged. As a result, all of us had a vigorous swim in the Yamuna. We enjoyed all kinds of water sport for hours. We splashed water on each other and even had swimming matches. You might not believe, it was only after this, that we were able to get back to being decent human beings, and by the time that happened, it was already nightfall! At night, bhaiya and Arjuna began drinking. It was the same assembly and the same garden, and even the conversation returned to the mace-fight that had taken place yesterday. Everybody began to praise the fine duel between bhaiya and Bhima. Everything was fine for some time, but when it went on and on, it irked Arjuna's ego. Consequently, he too started narrating his deeds of valour. He told us that not only was he an expert archer, but he could also hit a target without seeing, even in the dark. This bit of information stunned bhaiya and me. Actually, we both knew nothing when it came to archery, so it was natural for us to be impressed. And the conversation came to an end right there, for, seeing that we were suitably impressed, Arjuna too was satisfied and stopped blowing his trumpet.

The drinking session was about to end, and the servants had begun to serve the meal. The mood was such that everyone sat down for dinner in the veranda itself. And all of us were so hungry, that we began gorging on the food as soon as we were served. Suddenly, a strong wind blew out the torches. Everyone automatically stopped eating. I immediately ordered the servants to light up the torches again. However, because of this impediment, the condition of all of us gluttons had become very pitiable. The food was spread out in front of us, its aroma gently wafting into our noses, but still, we could not eat. This too was a unique experience. That is when I realised that not only were there clinking sounds near me, but I also distinctly heard someone busily munching food. I was surprised; Bhima continued to eat even in total darkness. We considered ourselves to be big gluttons, but Bhima had proved us wrong! It also provided an opportunity to crack jokes at his expense. Seeing Bhima eating in this manner, Arjuna reprimanded him, saying, "Brother Bhima, can you even see the food in this total darkness, or are you just eating anything that is coming into

your hand?”

To this, Bhima laughed and replied, “Absolutely! No matter how dark it is, I never lose sight of food. Tell me brother, what is the use of learning to hit an arrow even in the dark? Instead of that, if you had learnt to find food even in the dark, you would not be sitting hungry now!”

Hearing this brilliant jibe, everyone burst out laughing. Time flew as if on wings in the wonderful company of the five Pandava brothers. Actually, having stayed with these five brothers for so many days, I had observed that all of them listened to Yudhishtira with great respect. Just a sign from him was like a command for them. In truth, this deeply perturbed me. From the manner in which they obeyed Yudhishtira’s orders, I could see that their future would be dark and dreary. I let the thought pass as I was thinking too far ahead in time for no reason. As for the present, let me talk about our fun and frolic. One evening, our casual conversation drifted towards the subject of education. The Pandavas narrated some interesting anecdotes from their days at *Acharya* Drona’s school. You know very well that just like the memories of Vrindavan, the days which I had spent in the *ashram* had also become etched in my memory. Thus, naturally, I found the anecdotes about their *ashram* very interesting. I was eagerly listening to their tales. Seeing my eyes light up with interest, Arjuna enquired about our education. We too had anecdotes, but as compared to their bright and sparkling ones, ours did not quite seem as fascinating. Still, since Arjuna had asked, so I had to say something. Choosing my words carefully, I replied, “Unfortunately, Nature had not permitted us too many opportunities to be formally educated and so the knowledge that we have gleaned, has been from the difficult experiences we’ve had in life. But yes, after the age for education was well past, we did spend six months in the *ashram* of the great *Acharya* Sandipani, which is situated in Ujjaini. And it was our good fortune that *Acharya* Sandipani was not like *Acharya* Drona, who, without imparting any education, had asked for Eklavya’s thumb as *gurudakshina*.”

My story ended here, but I do not know why my sarcastic comment about *Acharya* Drona did not go down well with Arjuna. It surprised me that he could not tolerate a word against his *Acharya*, even when his teacher was in the wrong. All of a sudden, the atmosphere became serious. Realising my folly, I quickly added, “Oh yes, I just remembered! Actually, I had also received training in music from *Acharya* Shrutiketu in my childhood. He was the one who taught me how to play the flute.”

On this, Bhima immediately spoke, “Then play the flute for us. Otherwise, how can we believe that you can play the flute?”

Hearing this, everyone burst out laughing. Naturally, this comment of his

lightened the mood once again. But this time around, for some reason, Yudhishtira did not seem to like it. He immediately reprimanded Bhima, "That is not the way to speak; think before you say something!"

I did not like Yudhishtira admonishing Bhima for such a harmless joke. I soon forgot it, as everything about Yudhishtira was beyond my understanding. So, ignoring him, I focussed on Bhima's request and mesmerised everybody with the melodies of my flute. Bhima was delighted with my music. He was so pleased, that he spontaneously declared, "Kanhaiya, my friend, you are truly a great artist!"

Hearing the word 'artist,' bhaiya leapt on to the bandwagon. Surely, he was not going to let such an opportunity pass by! With measured sarcasm, he said immediately, "Ah, my friend, our Kanhaiya is endowed with many other talents as well. If you want to know about his other skills, take him with you to Hastinapur!"

Hearing this, everybody burst out laughing. But there was a surprise here too. Everyone was laughing except Bhima. It was beyond my comprehension, but it soon became clear. When the laughter stopped, Bhima enquired very innocently, "What other skills do you have, Kanhaiya?" That is when I understood that the innocent Bhima had taken even a joke very seriously. Oh well, such things keep happening. But thanks to Bhima's innocence, bhaiya jumped in once again. It was as if he had just got the opportunity he wanted. And brother Balarama was not about to let me off the hook so easily. He said, "Our Kanhaiya is an expert at taking everybody for a ride."

Thankfully, the Pandava brothers did not catch bhaiya's jibe. As a result, the matter ended right there. Then for some time, we just chatted about various things. That was when Arjuna brought up a peculiar question out of nowhere. Very gravely, he asked me, "What other interests do you have, Kanhaiya?"

I blurted out, "My sole interest is in destroying wrongdoers and in self-evolution."

Even I did not understand what I had just said, but Bhima really liked my answer. He immediately said, "Then you are a very useful person to know, Kanhaiya. For, even in Hastinapur, there are two big sinners, Duryodhana and Dushasana. Why do you not come back with us and destroy them as well? The evil from our lives will be eliminated, and you will have notched up two more evil-doers on your list."

Yudhishtira did not at all like Bhima speaking in this manner. He immediately reprimanded him, saying, "Brother, have you taken an oath to always speak without thinking?"

This time, I could not contain myself and lost my patience. After all, for

how long could I tolerate Yudhishtira's unwarranted and unnecessary nitpicking? So, I replied testily to Yudhishtira, "Bhima has not said anything wrong!"

Naturally, neither did Yudhishtira like what I said, nor did he like the manner in which I had spoken. He became red with rage. Seeing that the matter was getting out of control, Arjuna quickly jumped into the fray. Pouring oil on troubled waters, the poor boy said, "Actually, bhaiya is angry because both, Duryodhana and Dushasana are our cousins."

But this inane explanation by Arjuna did not go down well with me. I became even more incensed. I immediately said in a loud voice, "A sinner...is a sinner! They are a burden on this earth under all circumstances. How can a sinner be considered a relative? Kansa too was my Uncle. You are well aware that he was the first person I killed!"

Bhima fully subscribed to my argument. In a very happy voice, he said, "That is exactly what I have been repeatedly telling them since childhood!"

Hearing this, Yudhishtira's face fell. He did not say anything, but his expression spoke volumes. Bhima's open endorsement of all that I said was too much for his wounded ego. Regardless, I had said what I had to say, and then, before the situation could deteriorate, I laughed the entire matter off. I did not want to pick a fight, and that was that. So, I made some jest and along with that, the evening's session came to an end.

Truly, life had become far more enjoyable ever since these five brothers had arrived. The days were flying by so fast, that perhaps I would not have realised it even if my entire life had flitted by spending time with them! To tell you the truth, I had become euphoric. More interestingly, these days, there were hardly any games that we did not end up playing. Throwing a coconut in the waters of the Yamuna and then jumping in to retrieve it, was my favourite game. As you know, I was an expert swimmer, therefore, I was always the first to grab the coconut. And ever since my childhood you know very well how much I liked to win. Thus, it was natural for me to like this game. Actually, there were many other games at which no one could beat me. It was I who always won in chariot racing too. Also, no one could hit a target with a stone better than me. That was perhaps because I was used to aiming with my discus. But yes, there were some games at which my skills were extremely limited, like throwing a heavy stone as far as possible, and wrestling. In fact, only bhaiya and Bhima competed in these games. The rest of us remained mere spectators. In fact, you will not believe it, but we even ended up playing really childish games such as chase and hide-and-seek. I was twenty-one years old and look at the games that I played! Let me tell you something important. In the course of this visit of theirs, Arjuna and I had

become very close friends. Apart from his boastfulness and drinking wine, Arjuna had other unique traits like asking a great many questions and engaging in debates. Apart from these two traits, many of his other habits were similar to mine. His best trait was that he was quite disciplined when it came to getting up in the morning. We would often take long walks by the Yamuna early in the morning. In contrast, bhaiya and Bhima invariably had to be woken up in the morning.

On the whole, though all of us were different by nature, it was interesting that we were still enjoying ourselves to the hilt. Indeed, life had taken a very radical turn. Just a few days earlier, we had been isolated and had spent a drab life on the Gomanta Mountain, and now, almost in the blink of an eye, our days were once again filled with joy and festivities. I have no idea whether good days follow the bad ones or whether the bad ones follow the good times. Whatever the case may be, the truth is that human life is an amalgamation of good and bad days and good and bad times. No matter who it is or what kind of life he leads, the cycle of good times after bad times and vice versa is assured. Thus, only the person who knows how to face bad days and bad times properly, can be really happy throughout his life. And this can be learnt only by someone who is willing to understand, that if one has been given a human life, then bad phases will keep paying visits. Meaning, only the one who accepts the bad times and learns the art of finding joy and festivities even in them, can make his life as a human meaningful. Otherwise, man is destined to lead a miserable life.

Let us put that aside as there is no end to such contemplations. For at present, let me tell you about an interesting incident. One day, while on our morning walk along the banks of the Yamuna, Arjuna enlightened me on the situation in Hastinapur. The gist of this conversation was that they had the right to the throne of that kingdom, but owing to Duryodhana's stubbornness, neither were they able to claim the throne, nor did they enjoy any importance at the palace. Although Duryodhana's father, meaning King Dhritarashtra, and *Pitamah* (Grandsire) Bhishma had their best interests at heart, these poor men were helpless in front of Duryodhana. In fact, Arjuna had spoken about all this because he wanted to understand what they should do in this situation. Now I did not know about Arjuna, but I was pleased with this opportunity. For, you know very well that I was always eager to explain such things to others. So, I instantly said, "If you ask me, you all need to first revise your current opinion on the matter. You believe that grandsire Bhishma and Dhritarashtra are in your favour, but because of Duryodhana's overbearing nature and insistence, they are unable to make any decision in your favour. Even if this were true, in my opinion, sentiments which cannot bear fruit are worthless. The truth is that all three—the

perpetrators of atrocities, those on whom the injustice is wrought and those who stand by and do nothing to prevent it—are equally at fault. Duryodhana and Dushasana are the perpetrators, you are the ones who are tolerating their wrongdoing, and Bhishma *Pitamah* and Dhritarashtra are the ones who are just standing and watching this injustice being done. So, if understood correctly, all three parties are equally sinners. All said and done, until you reform yourself, you do not have any right to complain against others.” Hearing my forceful argument, Arjuna fell into deep thought, as if he was trying to understand what I had said. Whatever he made out of it, I was satisfied with having given my honest opinion. Thus, there was no question of my interrupting his thought process. So, we continued walking as we gazed upon the waters of the Yamuna. I do not know how much he agreed with me, or to what extent he understood my point of view, but suddenly he asked a ridiculous question. “Do you know how to differentiate between right conduct and wrong conduct?” he asked.

I was surprised upon hearing this question. At this point in time, I had no idea that Arjuna would one day, yet again ask me this very question standing in the midst of the Mahabharata war. Oh well, I was getting such a big opportunity to speak my thoughts for the first time. Was I going to let go of this chance? Now, whether I call it a coincidence or give it any other name, but it was Arjuna who had given me the opportunity to expound my thoughts for the first time, and it was he who had become the instrument for the greatest flight of my contemplation, meaning the Bhagavad Gita. That would come much later, but right now, in very practical terms, I replied, “Arjuna! Actually, it is the individual soul which decides what is right conduct and what is wrong conduct. This soul knows everything! Thus, the one who follows the voice of his soul adheres to right conduct and whoever ignores it, adheres to wrong conduct. But the sad fact is that the individual rarely takes refuge in this and ponders upon countless other things instead, because of which, not only has he no qualms about living with wrong conduct being perpetrated around him, but is also able to indulge in wrong conduct himself.”

I did not know, that this definition of right and wrong conduct, which I had stated to Arjuna in just four sentences then, would have to be delivered to him once again in eight hundred verses in the Bhagavad Gita! Well, at present, it did not seem as if Arjuna had understood much of what I had said. Actually, he believed more in making others understand rather than understanding something himself. Much later, this is what he had done all through the time I enunciated the Gita. Leaving that aside, let me narrate another incident to you. One day, Bhima, Arjuna and I were sitting and chatting. It was then that Bhima mentioned that Yudhishtira had taken a vow to always speak the truth. I was shocked to the

core of my being. I did not expect to hear anything of this sort. At any rate, I now knew the reason behind his egoistic attitude. How could anyone take such a foolish and aberrant vow and decide about the future, when everything in Nature always exists in the present? Indeed, this was something that only an extremely arrogant person would do. Seeing me in a deeply reflective mood, Arjuna asked, “What are you thinking about, my dear friend?”

I said, “I do not understand why Yudhishtira has taken this vow to always speak the truth. To do that, it is necessary, that he, at the very least, should first have knowledge of what is true and what is false.”

On hearing such a straightforward reply, Arjuna looked a little shocked for a moment, but he did not say anything; he just shook his head, as if to say he did not know the reason and ended the matter. But it was plainly evident from his expression, that he did not like my speaking in this manner about his elder brother. But it did not matter to me whether Arjuna liked it or not, I had to have closure on this matter today. I was just wondering how I could do it, when bhaiya joined us. All three of us were seated facing the Yamuna; watching us in deep conversation, Bhima too came and sat down with us. I became enthused on seeing him. The atmosphere would now be more conducive to put forward my grand views. Despite Arjuna’s reluctance, in order to take the discussion further, I asked him, “Perhaps you did not understand what I had said about having knowledge of truth and untruth.” With his head bowed low, Arjuna nodded in agreement. This is exactly what I was waiting for. Now, the opportunity to take my argument forward was offered on a platter to me. So, I immediately took advantage of the opportunity and said, “Arjuna! Great righteous deeds cannot be performed on the basis of what we discern to be the truth with our limited acumen. Take my example for instance. All the great deeds that I have performed—or should I say all the great religious tasks that I have accomplished—have been achieved either by lying or by taking refuge in a prevarication of truth.”

Both Bhima and Arjuna were greatly shocked by what I said. Only bhaiya remained unperturbed. Not only was he undisturbed, but he even passed a sarcastic remark at my expense by quickly adding, “Actually, even Kanhaiya has taken a vow to speak the truth at least once a day!” And with this ill-timed but splendidly sarcastic comment by bhaiya, the topic lost its gravity once again. And once the discussion lost its seriousness, all of us started jesting and playing around. And in this atmosphere of laughter and fun, the day’s meeting too came to an end. Meaning, because of the single hindrance created by bhaiya, I had lost the opportunity to express my grand thoughts concerning truth and untruth. In any case, a month quickly passed away in jest and play, and we did not even

realise it. Then, just as the time comes for every traveller to move on, it was now time for the Pandavas to leave too. I had become so lost in their company, that I had forgotten the fact that they would not be staying here forever. Indeed, when the realisation dawned that it was time for them to leave, I naturally became deeply distressed; but who has been able to stop those who have to part ways with us? I consoled myself in this manner, and when the time came for them to leave, I even took them to meet grandfather as was the custom. You will find it hard to believe, but I was meeting grandfather after an interval of almost a month. He appeared to be very worried. I too had not enquired about his health for a whole month. Seeing him so grim reminded me about the menace called Satrajit, which was threatening Mathura, but then this was a formal, courtesy call. Besides, as we could not discuss anything in the presence of the Pandavas, neither was there any conversation between me and grandfather on this matter, nor did we exchange sympathies as was our wont. So, our formal meeting soon came to an end. From there, we directly went home, where their mother—Aunt Kunti stood ready and waiting. Bhaiya and I took her blessings and with that, the Pandavas' caravan, which consisted of five chariots and four orderlies and soldiers, set off for Hastinapur by that afternoon. My mother and I felt very sad when they left. For that matter, even Bhima and Arjuna had become very emotional. But we had to part, and so we did.

And that's how the Pandavas eventually rode off into the horizon; nonetheless, they left me with golden memories of happy times spent together. Truly, these days that I spent with the Pandavas were the happiest ones since I had left Vrindavan. During this time, I had not bothered to ask for news of the royal palace, nor had I enquired about grandfather. In fact, I had not even given a single thought to the malevolent Satrajit. Radha, Vrindavan and Rukmini had also slipped quietly into oblivion during this period. Obviously, when life was offering its best fare, why would I pay any attention to such futile worries? But there certainly are some fools who lose their opportunity to live a beautiful life, by getting caught up in useless worries. Well, as I was fond of living life to the fullest, I did not let this chance pass by me, but in the process, I became highly concerned. The Pandavas had departed a few days earlier, but yet, I could not get Bhima and Arjuna out of my mind. The thought of Yudhishtira, and his silly vow of always speaking the truth, was constantly at the back of my brooding mind. Actually, in just a few days' time, I had become very attached to the Pandavas. And because of this, whenever I remembered Yudhishtira's vow, my mind was besieged with misgivings and anxiety, and I became worried about the future of the Pandavas. I could not understand, that when Nature itself is completely in the present living the moment, and when it constantly keeps

changing the circumstances and phases in our lives, how can a person take a vow to always speak the truth under all circumstances? If Yudhishtira was ever compelled to become the agent of lies, untruth and deception for the sake of the greater good, would he take refuge in truth even then? Would he commit such a grave misconduct, considering it as the right conduct to always speak the truth? If this were to happen, then he would destroy all his brothers along with himself. For, all those fools very humbly obeyed every one of Yudhishtira's orders. That would be a sin topped by an even greater transgression! Meaning, first, there would be the sin of Yudhishtira speaking the truth when he was meant to be an agent of untruth, and then there would be the greater sin of the implicit acceptance of his orders by all his brothers, without properly evaluating each order. What if these obedient brothers were put into some terrible peril because of Yudhishtira's vow? But I suppose these thoughts belonged to the future, and it was best to leave them till then. With this thought, I once again turned my focus away from this topic and thought it better to concentrate my attention on understanding the situation, which was currently brewing in Mathura. And with this thought, I once again became completely focussed on the happenings in Mathura.

Chapter 10

Swayamvar Of The Love Of My Life – Rukmini

Karma is a task, or a set of tasks, executed according to the demands of time and circumstances. But remember, actions alone cannot effect a change. However, by constantly performing actions according to the demands of time, bad times can certainly be warded off sooner or later. And time demanded an analysis of the situation that was brewing in Mathura. I had to foil Satrajit's evil designs and break up the growing unity of the Yadavas against the royal palace. Thus, by nightfall, I had moulded myself according to the demands of present times. I put the Pandavas out of my mind and focussed on the current situation in Mathura. Since I was going into deep contemplation after many days, I was finding it hard to focus. Not just contemplation, even sleep was eluding me. Perhaps, I was sorely missing my dear friends, the peerless Pandavas. I suppose it was because I had become used to being in their company all through the day, for almost a month. The situation was such, that if I tried to sleep after putting thoughts of the Pandavas out of my mind, Satrajit's conspiracy would rear its head and drive my sleep away. But when I tried to focus on the Satrajit issue, thoughts of the Pandavas would flood my mind. So, all said and done, I had to

spend the entire night tossing and turning in bed.

Oh well, if I had to spend a night without sleep, so be it. But I could not go without the night's sleep on a daily basis. The solution was right in front of me; if I absorbed myself in focussing on Mathura's situation, I would automatically be able to quit thinking about the Pandavas. Actually, there is only one way to forget a problem which has no solution—losing oneself in a problem which has a solution! So, even though I still felt sleepy, I got up from bed, and went straight to the palace. Grandfather was resting in his bedchamber. Seeing me, he got up immediately. I took his blessings and sat beside him on his bed. There was no need to ask him anything, the state of affairs at the palace was clearly etched on grandfather's face. Still, I needed to understand the actual situation from him in detail. On gentle enquiry, grandfather unburdened his worries onto me. Perhaps, he had been waiting all through the month just for this day. Indeed, due to my absence, he had become very lonely. No matter, I had now come back refreshed, and would soon set everything right.

This was the belief I had in myself. Coming to the gist of what grandfather told me, Mathura's treasure chests were completely empty. The fiscal condition was so pathetic that it was becoming difficult to meet even the daily expenses of the palace. What had hastened this deterioration was the fact that people had stopped paying taxes, thanks to Satrajit's incitement. Moreover, Satrajit had now started a new campaign of sorts. He had begun demanding that Brihaddal be made the crown prince. Furthermore, not only the Yadava leaders, but even the common people had gradually begun supporting this demand of his. But, the most dangerous aspect of this problem was, grandfather firmly believed that Satrajit had been able to make a rapid headway with his campaign, because he had succeeded in convincing everyone that Krishna was eyeing the throne of Mathura; that Krishna was trying to sidle up to King Ugrasena and gain the position of crown prince, and if he were to become the crown prince, then Jarasandha, who was waiting in the wings like a wounded serpent, would spew venom upon Mathura. And if that were to happen, Mathura would be wiped out from the face of Aryavarta. But Jarasandha had promised that if Brihaddal was made the crown prince instead, he would never attack Mathura.

I was dumbfounded on hearing this. I had been enjoying myself with the Pandavas, and meanwhile, Satrajit had made all arrangements to banish me from Mathura. The scoundrel had twisted the issue in such a manner, that all of Mathura was bound to support him. But the question was, did it make any difference to me if Brihaddal was made the crown prince? I did not want to become the crown prince of Mathura. Then, a thought struck me, 'But Kanhaiya, what are you saying? Understand the implications! Once the power is in

Satrajit's hands, will he let you stay here? All said and done, the intention behind the move was to uproot your well-entrenched position in Mathura. Have you understood now?' Oh yes! I had understood! But see what's happening with me, the situation was so grave, that I had now even started talking to myself! Well, I could understand Satrajit's intentions, but what had happened to the common people? How did they get alienated from me? How did they forget the hero who had chased away Jarasandha twice? Well, it was quite possible that they had really forgotten me; after all, what were the common people of Mathura left with? Their condition was even worse than that of the royal palace. Neither did they have any trade or business, nor was anyone encouraging them to work. Moreover, the brothels were now in business all day long. As it is, the Yadavas were addicted to meat eating and drinking right from the very beginning. On top of it, the gambling they indulged in all day long had completely destroyed their competence. Besides, their increasing fondness for dance and music had brought them on the brink of destruction. Now, such barren and empty minds are the devil's workshop anyway. Frankly, until now, I had never witnessed so much consumption of meat and wine and such addiction to prostitutes in any kingdom. Actually, not just Mathura, but many Yadava kingdoms of Aryavarta suffered the same fate. The truth was that the Yadavas were notorious all over Aryavarta for these bad habits of theirs. Still, the condition of the other kingdoms was not at all like that of Mathura. Now, it was useless to hope for loyalty or truth and justice from such good-for-nothing subjects. It can be said that when I could not think of anything, I was venting my frustration over Satrajit on the common people. But for how long could I continue to do that? Thus, grandfather and I had some fruits, and after somehow reassuring him that I would take care of Satrajit, I scurried out of the palace.

But what was I going to do next? The gravity of the situation was such that there was no respite. Still, on getting the opportunity, I quietly left for my house on the banks of the Yamuna to spend some time alone. Actually, first of all, I wanted to carefully analyse the situation from every perspective. Once the actual depth of the problem is known, it becomes very easy to find a solution to it. So, lost in thought, I would at times sit on the swing while sometimes, I would stroll around the garden, deep in thought. To avoid any disturbance while I contemplated, I had not brought along even one orderly with me. When I got tired of thinking, I would go and pluck fruits from the nearby trees. And then I would make do with only these fruits throughout the day. And my deep contemplation finally bore fruit. Soon, I had arrived at many important conclusions. The most dangerous thing of all was that now, more than ever, Jarasandha had become my greatest enemy. I had been under the impression that

by chasing him off from Gomanta, I would be rid of him for some time. But perhaps, the disgrace of having to flee from Gomanta Mountain had so badly wounded his ego, that finishing me off had become the single most important mission in his life. But since he was not in a position to attack at present, and also because he wanted to avoid repeating his earlier mistake which he had made in his hastiness. He was now first creating an alarming situation for me in Mathura. And the most dangerous aspect of this was that he was very astutely utilising Satrajit for this purpose. Now just think, what news could be worse for me than knowing that Jarasandha and Satrajit, my two permanent enemies had joined hands against me? I thought, ‘Kanhaiya, my friend, this time, you are in serious trouble!’ If Satrajit had been operating all by himself, I could have easily taken care of it. And, as for Jarasandha, I had already dealt with him before on two separate occasions. But now, when the two of them had combined forces, how could I deal with them? For, a person can either deal with his enemy at home, or with the one who is outside. But when one is surrounded by enemies from all sides, the situation becomes quite grave.

In fact, the situation had become more formidable this time around, because contrary to his nature, Jarasandha was keeping his temper under control. Perhaps, even you must have experienced what Jarasandha was experiencing. Both of his earlier attacks were angry outbursts; as a result, anger had overshadowed his intelligence, and because of that he had to suffer defeat both the times. But this time around, since he had kept his temper under control, he had been able to make a good strategic move. Firstly, with Satrajit’s help, he wanted to make Brihaddal the crown prince of Mathura. Then, he wanted to have me removed from Mathura, by creating animosity in the minds of the people against me. In short, Jarasandha was trying his best to get me thrown out of Mathura, either by inciting the people against me, or by forcing me to leave the kingdom by creating insurmountable problems for me. Did you see? As long as Jarasandha was burning with the desire for revenge, he was not that dangerous. But as it is said, cold and subdued anger proves to be more dangerous and effective. My brain had stopped functioning completely. I had already spent time in exile on the Gomanta Mountain. Indeed, the very thought of leading a life like that made my heart quiver. But enough about me, as for my thoughts about Mathura’s welfare, I knew that Brihaddal was in no way capable of being crowned the prince. Yes, when it came to misconduct and offensive behaviour, he was indeed the leader of the Yadavas! Actually, Brihaddal was closely related to me. He was, in fact, my mother’s sister’s son. But how could someone who spent all his time in debauchery be made the crown prince? Mathura was lost in darkness anyway. How could a man who remained intoxicated all day be put in

charge of its destiny?

The situation was truly critical. Not just mine, but even Mathura's future appeared dim. There did not seem to be any way for me to survive, and it did not seem that Mathura would survive either. It was already on the brink of starvation, and moreover, shirking work had become a part of its people's very being. In such a situation, Mathura needed a guide, and I could certainly satisfy this need of *Mathurawasis*. I could even save them with my diligence and show them the right way. But just see the game that Nature played; it had made it difficult for me to even stay in Mathura. But no matter what happened, I could not bear to see so many people's lives being destroyed in this callous manner. I had to try to save them. They just had to be saved. But how could I do it? The great *Karmaveer* Krishna had become completely immobilised. The situation was such that I could not engineer a fallout between Satrajit and Jarasandha, and as long as this nexus between these two existed, it was not possible to save either Mathura or myself. Speaking of the situation on the other side, neither could I stop the wave of opposition gathering strength against me in Mathura, nor could I stay there much longer if this campaign against me continued. The situation was indeed grave and complex. I could not see any means of saving myself or Mathura.

Did that mean that I, the *Karmaveer* Krishna, would give up, stand by and not do anything? Never! This was not possible. Once again, I seriously meditated on the problem. After deliberating for just a few days, I arrived at the conclusion that my problem and that of Mathura was the same, and so was our enemy. And when the larger good also benefitted me, what was the harm in starting this difficult task by trying to save Mathura first? Perhaps, a way to save myself too would emerge in the process of saving Mathura. Actually, I had only two enemies, Jarasandha and Satrajit, whereas Mathura had a third one as well—Mathura itself.

Anyway, having arrived at a conclusion, I returned to my father's house. And with me, I also took along the worries concerning Mathura. Truly, these foolish men had brought themselves so close to the brink of destruction, that it was very difficult to save them. And as long as the situation in Mathura did not improve, it was not possible to change their mindset. And I could not restrict Satrajit as long as their opinion about the royal palace and me remained unchanged. It was a very simple matter. If I wanted to save myself, there was just one solution, and that was to rein in Satrajit's devious moves. And this, considering the current situation, was not something that grandfather and I could do on our own. But yes, if the common people of Mathura supported us, then it was possible. And the common people would not come to their senses until their

situation improved. Only those who were gainfully employed would worry about the palace. An idle person would only enjoy creating a ruckus. And both, the situation as well as the people in Mathura, were so pathetic that just thinking about them made my head spin. Mathura's economy was already a shambles. Everyone's savings were gone; there was no money to revive dead or dying businesses, and none to start new ventures either. Mathura also did not have a product that was exclusively produced here, through which income could be generated. The royal treasury was anyway wiped clean and empty. Thus, even the palace was in no position to help its people. All in all, the political manoeuvres of Satrajit and the bad habits of the people clearly showed that the stage was all set for a civil war to erupt in the streets of Mathura. This was exactly why I had pointedly refused the gift of scores of courtesans from Chandak as well as Queen Padmavati. Good courtesans were certainly a necessity for every kingdom, provided a hard-working person visited them once or twice in a week, to listen to their songs. But in Mathura, these courtesans had turned into a disease. Here, they were no longer just a means of relaxation after hard work. Instead, they had become the epitome of debauchery.

Well, at present, I did not see any way in which I could save myself, so what was the use of thinking about such things? At this time, I had to only keep an eye on the situation and wait for my opportunity. And as far as saving Mathura was concerned, its prime need at this time was money. If money could be pumped in, the businesses could be revived. Once businesses were revived, there would be employment. If there was employment, the people would focus on work and move away from debauchery. If this were to happen, the royal palace could then begin to get an inflow of taxes once again. However, for this entire cycle to begin, I had to inspire the people to work hard. Even if one person from every household were to work at least as a cowherd, it would solve the current problem of starvation in Mathura. But as simple as all these tasks appeared to be, they were just as difficult to accomplish in reality. To establish business in this decadent state of Mathura, and to engage these indolent people in gainful work was no laughing matter, especially when Satrajit was busy encouraging them to do exactly the opposite, with his counter propaganda. Whichever way one looked at the problem, one reached the same conclusion. As long as Satrajit remained powerful, neither could Mathura be brought back to prosperity, nor could I stay here for very long unless Mathura became affluent again.

Alright, it did not matter as far as I was concerned. At the most, it was a question of two people's lives. The fight between me, Satrajit and Jarasandha would keep going on; but was it justifiable to make Mathura bear the

consequences of these battles? As soon as I had this great thought about everybody's welfare, I thought, why not deposit a part of my wealth in the royal treasury? Forget about me, but this would at least improve Mathura's conditions to some extent. But this was followed by another thought. This would undoubtedly weaken my own position. And frankly, if my position was weakened, it would not be favourable for Mathura's well-being either. So, I had to think of a solution which would not create a difference between my influence and that of Satrajit. So, why not propose that if all the Yadava leaders contributed to the treasury, then I too was eager to help the royal palace? Yes, this was the right thing to do. Really, once the financial condition of the palace improved, then by taking several measures for the benefit of the populace, at least Mathura could be saved from ruin. And along with this, the condition of the royal palace would improve too. And when I had to make the royal palace prosperous, what was the point in going for half measures? Meaning, I was gradually forgetting to worry about myself and getting absorbed in anxiety about Mathura. It is said that when you think of the good of others, you also find a way that leads to your own benefit. And sure enough, by constantly thinking about the betterment of Mathura, a brilliant thought struck me. And it was so perfect, that it would kill several birds with one stone. In fact, it could solve all the problems in one stroke. The menace hovering over my head could be warded off and it could also improve Mathura's conditions.

Well, you would surely ask, "Dear Krishna, what magical herb did you stumble upon? Why do you not tell us?" So, here it is. I was thinking that the precious Syamantaka gem was a gift of nature. So, its rightful owner was actually the kingdom of Mathura. Why not ask Satrajit to donate the Syamantaka gem to Mathura? If this magical gem was deposited in Mathura's royal treasury, all of Mathura's woes would be resolved in the blink of an eye. Not only that, but with this, even Satrajit's wings could be clipped. For, his dominance was only due to this gem. As soon as it was out of his possession, the Yadava leaders would abandon him, and everybody would automatically flock back into the folds of the royal palace. Then a thought struck me, 'Well, you have thought of the perfect solution, Krishna. But you are talking as if Satrajit habitually listens to you. He has to agree to give up the gem in the first place! Until then, all your plans are merely wishful thinking!' Indeed, it would have been easier to take a prey from a lion's mouth than to make Satrajit part with the gem. I knew all this, but this was the only solution. And this was what was right as well. But what if he did not agree? Well, then he would be made to part with it by hook or by crook. But what if he still did not give it? Then I would assume that Nature did not want Mathura's situation to improve. Thereafter, even I would not be able to

provide much help to the royal palace. A voice within instantly reprimanded me, 'Hey! You are going back on your word! Why do you not deposit your own wealth in the royal treasury anyway?' I retorted just as quickly, 'Hey! What is this? We were talking about Satrajit, right? Then how did the conversation shift to me?' I am telling you the truth; I cared about Mathura from the bottom of my heart. But neither was I mad nor was I an emotional fool to obstinately stick to what I had said earlier even after knowing that Nature did not wish to help Mathura.

Let me explain in detail. The truth of the matter was that I had already adopted Mathura as my very own city a long time ago. But the Yadava leaders had always created such situations, that Mathura had still not been able to take me as one of its own. So, how could I sacrifice all my personal wealth for its upliftment, especially considering the fact that Satrajit's evil designs would gain strength with my bankruptcy? And as far as inspiring the people of Mathura was concerned, I had no doubt about my own capabilities on that front. With my untiring efforts and power of persuasion, I could free the inhabitants of Mathura from all their addictions and bring them onto the path of hard work. Meaning, I had the ability to turn them into diligent and productive citizens, and I had nothing to lose in it either. And anyway, I was always ready to do anything that was for the welfare of all. 'So, do not bother me by talking about wealth,' I told the voice within. I had now understood that if Mathura was to be really saved, it was extremely necessary for me to survive as well. Then why would I, the one who believes in action, not take into consideration all the factors while making my decision? So, I would save myself as well as Mathura. However, the voice within me continued with its questions, 'But how will you improve Mathura's condition without wealth? And who will let you improve Mathura's situation in the first place?' Well, that was true; Satrajit and the other Yadavas leaders were going to do everything in their power to try and stall me. For, their very purpose was to worsen the conditions of Mathura, and thus pressurise grandfather into making Brihaddal the crown prince. On the other hand, it was also true that grandfather would never allow this to happen and put Mathura on the path of destruction. Grandfather would not agree to this, no matter how much he was pressurised. Meaning, this would set off a civil war in the kingdom.

No, I would not let any such thing happen. I would ponder some more upon this topic, but I would surely find a solution which would save me as well as Mathura. So, let us leave this topic aside for now. Let me introduce another aspect of this problem to you. Actually, from the bottom of his heart, grandfather wanted me to be the crown prince. And as far as I was concerned, neither did I want to become the prince nor were the circumstances conducive to it. The

Yadavas could not even bear to let me stay in Mathura. Then how would they let me become their crown prince? On the other hand, for how long could grandfather tolerate this kind of power struggle at his age, even if he wanted to? And if grandfather's power was eroded, I would be thrown out of Mathura. What I mean to say is that the problem was complicated in not one but a thousand ways. All said and done, considering the need of the hour, it was better to steadily resolve these issues one at a time, instead of indulging in over-the-top heroics. So, other issues like changing the Yadava mindset and triggering a revival in Mathura's flagging economy would have to wait. The first thing to do was to increase my power over the Yadavas so that the pressure on grandfather could be eased. Then I would not be compelled to leave Mathura under any circumstances. The matter was clear and straightforward. Only if I stayed in Mathura could I do something for it. Meaning, once again, the entire issue had got linked to my own survival. Now, even if one has to act, it is necessary for one to be alive! And the path towards that could be cleared only by cutting Satrajit and his followers down to size. So, I began to spend sleepless nights, lost in thinking of ways to create a powerful impact on Satrajit and the other important Yadava leaders. When I could not think of anything even after giving the matter considerable thought, I decided to pay Satrajit a visit. For, time was racing past, as if on wings, and with the passage of time, Satrajit was tightening the noose around the royal palace. And before Satrajit could destroy both Mathura and me, I thought, why not find out what was on Satrajit's mind?

So, the very next afternoon, I landed at Satrajit's house. I had gone there to understand Satrajit's intentions, but here, I myself was in danger of getting lost. Once again, it was Satyabhama who opened the door. As soon as I saw her innocent face, I recalled my first meeting with her. On seeing me, her face lit up with delight for a moment, but then, she suddenly froze. It was hardly difficult for me to understand why her mood had changed so quickly. I could clearly see that she was not her normal self. Well, it was usually difficult for young girls to remain normal upon seeing me. Now, what can I hide from you? Satyabhama's demeanour once again reminded me of Radha. You would remember that whenever I chanced upon Radha, I would react in a similar manner. But this was not the time to think about such things and paying too much attention to them. So, I straightaway asked her if I could meet her father Satrajit. Hearing my curt, formal query, Satyabhama responded accordingly. She said that he had gone to the chamber which housed the gem and he would be there for some time. Her tone was devoid of any emotion. And why would it not be? After all, my question itself was quite terse. But, what could I do? I was so caught up in my problems, that even though I desired to, I could not be more loving in my

interaction with her. Well, I had at least got the information that I had come here to extract. The Syamantaka gem was kept here, in the house, and there was no doubt that at this very moment, Satrajit was extracting gold from it to fill his coffers. Meaning, not just the hunter but even the prey was right here, in Mathura. Now, after getting this important information, there did not seem to be any sense in waiting for Satrajit. I thought that since my work was done, it was better to leave quietly. But as I was about to take my leave, a sudden thought struck me. When my work was done, why should I leave the innocent Satyabhama unhappy? What if Radha had been so curt with me? So, I immediately changed my demeanour. I stepped inside the room and very lovingly asked her if she would be so kind as to get me a glass of that divine sherbet she had given me on my previous visit. As soon as my mood changed, her mood changed as well. She ran and waltzed back with my drink of cool sherbet. Seeing her so happy, I too was pleased. Now, my work here was done, there was no need to wait here any longer. So, I smiled and asked for her permission to leave. Hearing this, she replied in astonishment, "Will you not wait to meet my father?"

What she had said was right, but when I had discovered such a huge secret, what was the point in meeting Satrajit? So, turning the conversation around, I said, "It was nothing important. I had come here just to pay him a courtesy call. Kindly let him know that I had come."

Saying this, I rose to leave, but Satyabhama was not willing to let me leave so easily! Well, when did I ever let Radha go easily either? So, in order to stop me from leaving, the innocent girl asked very glibly, "Since you are already here, why do you not wait for some more time?"

I had no objection to spending some time with Satyabhama. But my political strategy forbade me from meeting Satrajit at this point of time, because, taking advantage of this opportunity that I had got, I wanted to keep him in an unsettled frame of mind. I believed that if nothing else, he would at least worry for some time about why I had paid him a visit. The direct benefit of doing something like this is that when your enemy is caught up in trying to find out something concerning you, he never attacks. Meaning, you become safe from being attacked by him, at least for some time. This is between you and me; I was myself at a loss to know why I had gone to his house! And when even I was unsure, there was no chance of Satrajit understanding anything! It was possible that his failure to understand the purpose of my visit might force his hand, leading him to make a false move and unwittingly show me a way. With this hope, and with the secret of the gem being housed in Mathura itself, I bade farewell to Satyabhama, despite her reluctance.

But what can I say? Satrajit was also a devious old hand at politics. I kept waiting, but neither did he try to contact me, nor did he make any enquiries about me. I had gone to surprise him but it can be said that it was he who had surprised me instead. But it did not matter. I would wait for another opportunity and think of some other tactic. Soon, I was lost in thought again. I could not think of any new strategy, but one day, when I was sitting at home, grandfather summoned me in a hurry, and I immediately set off for the palace. Grandfather was seated in his bedroom even in the middle of the day. At this moment, he appeared more perturbed than usual. I could not discern exactly what new trouble had appeared on the horizon. There were already a lot of troubles and on top of it, here was one more! I began to wonder whether this was really Mathura or the 'city of troubles'! Indeed, I did not even give it much thought but merely went up to him and plonked myself by his side, with anxiety quite evident upon my beleaguered face. Then, after a longish interval, grandfather let out a deep sigh and filled me in on the new trouble at hand. He said very unhappily, "Kanhaiya, I am sure you already know that these unruly Yadava leaders have made my condition so miserable, that even though I am the King here, the truth is that Mathura is no longer under my rule anymore. I am just a titular King."

What he was saying was true. I too could not bear to see his pathetic condition. But at that moment, I was in deep water myself. What help could I be of under these circumstances? What consolation could I offer? Truly, at this moment, we were like two drowning men clutching at each other to save ourselves. As a consequence, we were unable to reach the banks, but were just struggling to save ourselves from drowning. That being the case, there did not appear to be much to say, and I hardly had the inclination to listen. So, this time, unlike my usual practice, I did not even try to understand what the matter was, I just sympathised with him the best I could, and got up to leave. To tell you the truth, this had become a weekly ritual between us. Grandfather would send for me, tell me of his woes, I would offer a few words of support and return. But what was this! Just as I was ready to leave, grandfather reached out and stopped me. Suddenly, his face turned even graver. And before I could understand what was going on, he himself broke the silence and said in a very morose voice, "Krishna! That is not all; Mathura's sovereignty itself is being attacked in Aryavarta now. On one hand, I am no longer being accepted as a King in Mathura and on the other, Aryavarta is not even considering Mathura as a kingdom now. I cannot bear such humiliation anymore. I am thinking of giving up everything and surrendering."

Observe what's happening here, my main pawn, the king himself was being trumped. I thought, 'If grandfather abdicated out of sorrow or fear, then

Kanhaiya, my friend, you can bid farewell to Mathura forever! Then keep searching for another Gomanta Mountain to take refuge on!’ Although I could not at all comprehend the purport of grandfather’s words, I could certainly understand that this time around, his depression was very deep. And I was also well aware of the fact that if I did not take care of the situation soon, everything would be lost. It was also crystal clear to me that considering the circumstances, and the age at which he was holding on to the throne, every moment for him was not much different from dying. I could also understand that this time, I could not leave him without giving him a strong assurance and a definite plan to tackle the situation. And to reassure him, it was necessary for me to get to the bottom of the problem. I was familiar with the situation in Mathura, but I was completely clueless about this new trouble which had paid us a visit from Aryavarta. Thus, I asked grandfather to explain the matter to me in its entirety. I could think of a way out only if I knew what the problem was, right? My poor grandfather was more than willing to unburden his troubles, and began giving me a clear and detailed picture. Grandfather’s spies had brought him the news that next month, a grand *swayamvar* (a ceremony wherein a princess chooses her bridegroom from a large number of assembled princes) of Rukmini, the Princess of Kundinpur, had been arranged. He had learnt that this entire *swayamvar* had been arranged under Jarasandha’s supervision.³⁴

Upon hearing these words from grandfather, my mind stopped functioning. Suddenly, my heart began to pound rapidly. No doubt, I soon regained my composure, as grandfather had not come to the end of the matter. He was still speaking, and since it concerned Rukmini, it was necessary to pay close attention to every single word of his. The gist of what he said was that in order to please Jarasandha, Rukmini’s brother, Rukmi, was going to forcefully marry his sister off to Shishupala. Actually, this was their personal matter. But our concern was, that on Jarasandha’s orders, Mathura was not to be invited. This was not only a terrible insult to Mathura, but on a personal level, it was a very grave affront to grandfather too, as he was the King of Mathura. After revealing this, he fell into a moody silence, but then, suddenly, swept by a fresh wave of emotions, he burst forth, “Tell me, Kanhaiya! Am I not being humiliated within the kingdom as well as outside it? How much humiliation can I tolerate? How many more insults do I swallow? And after being humiliated to such an extent, why should I continue being King at my age?”

This was the truth. And yet, it was not the whole truth. It was plainly evident that grandfather was so exhausted, that if he were pressurised any further, he would certainly abdicate the throne. At any rate, what was the need

for him to take so much stress at such an advanced age? But if he did abdicate the throne, I would be instantly debarred from Mathura. Meaning, from this perspective, his breaking down was completely unfavourable for me. The problem was grave, and it was necessary to find an immediate solution. But what could I do? On hearing Rukmini's name, forgetting everything else, I became absorbed in her thoughts. How could my poor mind function? It too was helpless in front of my heart. I was trapped in my own worries, and the queen of my dreams was having a *swayamvar*, and that too, she was being forced to marry a rascal like Shishupala! Meaning, I would just have to keep dreaming over here, while the queen of my dreams would become Shishupala's wife! Now, what do I tell you, thousands of such thoughts flitted through my mind in a second. The problem of Jarasandha and Satrajit remained as it was, and grandfather's exhaustion had complicated it even more. In such a situation, when my heart was looking for some solace, the news of Rukmini's *swayamvar* had inflicted a thousand wounds upon it instead. Now you tell me, how could this Kanhaiya, who was mortally wounded at heart, fight a battle that was raging on all fronts? How could he think of a solution even if he wanted to?

My life and my very existence had been under attack ever since the time of my birth. But this time, it was Rukmini, the queen of my dreams, who was in trouble. That being the case, it is difficult to even imagine my condition. I had to save both, my life and my dream. I had to save Rukmini under any circumstances. My love aside, even from a humanitarian point of view, a girl being forced to marry someone against her wishes was a punishment worse than death. It did not matter if I could not attain Rukmini, but how could I bear to see her living a hellish life? Now, regardless of whether I could bear to see her living such a life, the truth of the matter was that there was nothing else that I could do. Obviously, when one's own existence was uncertain, what can one do? But then I thought, 'Krishna, my friend, why are you so despondent? You cannot surrender in this manner.' So, I awakened my entire being. For, at the peak of troubles on which I stood now, I had the support of my innermost consciousness alone. After all, even for my consciousness, it was a question of 'now or never.' And you will not believe that an idea did spring forth into my awareness immediately. Indeed, when the matter was related to Rukmini, my mind had no other option but to muster all its strength. And amazingly, the news of the *swayamvar*, which had shaken me to my very core, had transformed into a blessing after a single flight of my contemplation. If it was put to action correctly, the present problem could be completely solved. The plan was clear in my mind, but the need of the hour was to take care of grandfather. For, he was the one I needed for the implementation of my plan. Actually, no sooner had the

plan crystallised in my mind than my self-confidence surged forth. And displaying that confidence, I said to grandfather, “We have two problems. The first and more important one is the internal situation in Mathura. I feel that the King has to respect the wishes of the people. When all the Yadava leaders desire that Brihaddal be made the crown prince, then why do you not make him so? You are being unnecessarily stubborn over it.”

Grandfather replied, “Kanhaiya, what are you saying! Are you not well aware of all his bad habits? He is your cousin, after all. Who knows him better than you?”

I said, “Grandfather, why do you not think that when he shoulders this responsibility, he will come to his senses on his own. I suggest that you immediately hold a meeting of all the Yadava leaders, with the intention of electing a crown prince. But do not reveal that we have decided in favour of Brihaddal. After that, leave the rest to me; I will take care of things from there.” Now, what does the one who is drowning want but a strong assurance? Besides, grandfather usually agreed and followed whatever I said, and he also had complete faith in me. So, he was bound to agree with me. All the pieces had fallen perfectly into place. I had even made the first move and was happy. With one masterstroke, my mind had opened several doors to numerous possibilities. This is why I say, how can anyone defeat Krishna as long as his awareness and his intelligence are with him?

There were many things to be taken care of, and very little time to put them into action. I had just thought of a plan for now; it was not as if success would be assured. So, I reined in my rising pride and took leave of grandfather. Yes, while leaving, I did not forget to play my next move, thinking of the solution to the second part of the problem, which was Rukmini’s *swayamvar*. As I was about to leave, I said, “Grandfather, do not tell anybody about Rukmini’s *swayamvar* and that Mathura has not been invited. It will only unnecessarily give us a bad reputation. If Jarasandha and Rukmi want to forcefully marry her off to Shishupala, why should it concern us? Our honour lies in not letting this news spread across Mathura.”

Truly, at this time, I was walking with a spring in my step, and my intelligence was at the peak of its sharpness. This was a wonder in itself, but I was not one to be outdone, for as soon as I left the palace, I became absorbed in thoughts of Rukmini. My Rukmini! The queen of my dreams! How could she be married to anyone else? Even if she was not married to me, she could definitely not be married off to the evil Shishupala and that too coercively, as part of a plan! No! This would never happen! The evil Jarasandha was the enemy of my life! And now, wittingly or unwittingly, he had become the enemy of my

beloved's life! But I would never let his plans succeed. I felt like piling a thousand curses upon Jarasandha's head. But that alone was not going to save my dear Rukmini from this grave injustice. I had the rest of my life to vent my anger upon him and hurl as many curses upon his head as I desired. However, at the moment, it was better to focus on the tasks at hand. There was just over a month before the *swayamvar*, and in that span of time, I had a number of things to take care of. The problem created by Satrajit was staring me right in the face. First of all, I had to deal with Satrajit and Brihaddal. Only then would I be able to reach Rukmini.

With this thought, I once again focussed on *karma*-action. And right now, my task was to ensure that the meeting of the Yadavas took place as per the plan. And keeping that goal in mind, I asked grandfather to hold it in the most spacious ground of Mathura. To grandfather's credit, even though he was in such a grim situation, he arranged for the meeting in just a week's time. For me, these seven days passed in a whirl, and the day of the meeting was finally at hand. Along with grandfather and bhaiya, I set off for the meeting well in time. Most of the Yadava leaders had also arrived there at the appointed time. Indeed, everyone was very excited about the pronouncement of the crown prince. The entire council of ministers could also be seen in attendance. Well, this enthusiasm was understandable. But now, let me tell you a secret. My going to the meeting with grandfather was also a part of my strategy. My intention was clear; I wanted everyone to think that grandfather was going to announce my name as the crown prince, so that when Brihaddal was nominated and elected to the post, Satrajit and others would consider it as their victory and not a part of my strategy. As soon as we reached the venue, there was pandemonium in the assembly. As I had said earlier, all the Yadava leaders, including Satrajit, were already seated on the podium and they became uneasy on seeing me arrive with grandfather. Their uneasiness did not matter, as for now, even I climbed up the stage along with grandfather. As for the common people of the Yadava clan, I could clearly see about a thousand youth seated there. Most of them seemed to have been brainwashed. And perhaps this was another reason for the present ruckus. Regardless, grandfather and I took our seats. Naturally, I was seated in the front row with grandfather. As soon as we had taken our seats, shouts supporting Brihaddal erupted from all corners of the grounds. The mood, especially in Satrajit's camp, was very explosive. And as for me, I was compelled to see my position in Mathura in the eyes of the people. Actually, this was all the result of my own strategy. This entire fracas was proof of the illusion that I had created by arriving with grandfather. Everyone was under the misconception that grandfather had arranged for this meeting to elect me the

crown prince. However, occasionally, a few voices could be heard shouting in my support as well. And I was content with that; but largely, the mood of the meeting was ample proof of Satrajit's hold over Mathura and my own pathetic position.

Anyway, this public display of my pathetic position continued for some time. Finally, as per plan, grandfather invited me to speak and I got up immediately. But nobody was letting me say a single word. Just as I had expected, as soon as my name was called out, the chaos in the ground increased. With great difficulty, grandfather succeeded in pacifying the crowd with the assurance that the candidate would be chosen by popular opinion; but he first asked the people to just listen to what Kanhaiya had to say. Did you see the position I was in? Only when grandfather gave such a strong assurance did everyone agree to hear me out. Now, before some other disturbance could occur, I immediately began to speak, "Greetings, my friends! First and foremost, I would like to clarify that I have no desire whatsoever to become the crown prince of Mathura."

Hearing this, a wave of delight surged through Satrajit's camp. This was natural, but what happened next, completely exposed the kind of impression my personality had created on the collective mindset of Mathura. Someone in the crowd shouted sarcastically, "Hey, you deserter! What makes you think we will even consider making you the crown prince of Mathura?"

Hearing this, the entire assembly area filled with peals of laughter. I felt terribly embarrassed. Bhaiya too went red with rage. The barb in the taunt was indeed quite sharp. Before I could compose myself or pacify bhaiya, another heckler shouted, "If we make Krishna the crown prince, he will run away once again, as soon as he hears the news of Jarasandha's attack. We will have to keep searching where our prince has vanished!"

Many more such ribald jokes were cracked at my expense. On hearing them, thousands of emotions flitted through my mind within a moment. I do not know what would have happened if the circumstances had been different, but since the issue concerned Rukmini, I ignored everyone, and before getting ridiculed anymore, I once again started trying to steer the meeting in the right direction. Addressing them yet again, I said very gravely, "As you all know, King Ugrasena has called for this meeting to elect the crown prince of Mathura. Thus, all of you collectively propose the name of the potential crown prince. The royal palace's wish would be the same as everyone's choice." As was expected, only one name was heard being shouted vociferously from all directions, "Brihaddal, Brihaddal!" In the end, respecting everyone's wishes, Brihaddal was declared the crown prince by collective opinion. My strategy had been

successful; Satrajit believed this to be a victory of his charismatic influence over the Yadava leaders. I too wanted him to remain under this illusion. Full of enthusiasm with the first success of my strategy, I immediately called Brihaddal onto the stage. I then congratulated and embraced him. Seeing this, slogans like, “Long live Brihaddal!” began to ring all around with double the intensity. A few slogans were shouted in my praise as well. There was commotion all around. Now, even the people who had been sitting had stood up. Some had even begun to sing and dance. All in all, there was a celebratory atmosphere all over the ground. A queue of people had formed to personally congratulate Brihaddal and Satrajit. I, on the other hand, was bluntly ignored and left to stand quietly by myself, to watch this drama of victory. There was a reason behind that as well. So far, only the first phase of my carefully laid out plan had been executed. I still had to play my trump card. I was now patiently waiting for the commotion to subside. So, as soon as everybody’s enthusiasm whittled down a little, I addressed the gathering once again, “On everybody’s behalf, I congratulate Brihaddal on becoming the crown prince of Mathura. As you all know, our Prince Brihaddal is a very brave man. I am convinced that if there is any threat to Mathura, he will do anything that is required to protect it.” Then looking pointedly at him, I asked, “Will you not, Brihaddal?”

Now, had a prey ever failed to walk recklessly into a trap that I had laid? The poor, foolish Brihaddal did not suspect a thing and was hopelessly caught in my trap. Indeed, my innocent query had filled him with such enthusiasm, that he stood tall and declared with great fervour, “I affirm that if anybody even looks at Mathura with an evil eye, I will cut his head off!”

After this impressive speech by Brihaddal, the meeting ended. I was happy! Everything had gone according to my plan. In any case, you know very well that wherever I was, things invariably went the way I wanted them to. Still, one could be sure only when the task was actually accomplished. And now, it had been taken care of, so, naturally, my ego had begun to rear its head. But many phases of my plan still remained to be implemented. You may ask if this was a single plan or a series of plans. Well, you will find that out at the right time, but first, it was time for me to rein in my ego. Obviously, there was no question of gratifying my ego before my entire plan was implemented successfully. So, I controlled myself, and focussing my attention on Rukmini’s impending *swayamvar*, I set off for my house. How could I tolerate the queen of my dreams being forcefully married off to a scoundrel like Shishupala? Incidentally, Shishupala was, in fact, my maternal cousin. You may be aware that he was one of my Uncle’s sons. But, so what? Brihaddal was my cousin too! He was my mother’s sister’s son. For some reason I could not fathom, it suddenly

seemed to be the period to wage power struggles with siblings! Oh well, now that the war was upon me, I was not one to back down.

Anyway, I somehow whiled away the next three-four days, but it was now time for the next phase of the plan to be executed. For this, I needed Brihaddal's help. Fortunately, this did not pose a difficulty, for, unaware of my political skills, this poor, innocent soul was actually very happy with me at that point in time. Thus, with his help and permission, I arranged for a great chariot race in Mathura after ten days. I had been able to easily convince him that this festival would not only entertain the people, but would also make him very popular with the citizenry. The poor fellow believed this to be my brotherly affection for him. So, the matter was settled very easily. Now, for the next phase of my formidable plan, I wanted as many people to participate as possible. To ensure that, I had entered ten of my own chariots in the race too. Moreover, pulling out all stops, I had also decided to personally participate as a charioteer in the race. For, the next phase of the plan depended entirely on the success of this race. Nobody knew of my hidden political agenda behind the arrangement of this race, including bhaiya. Everybody thought that this festival had been organised by Krishna to celebrate Brihaddal's appointment as the crown prince. There was great enthusiasm in all of Mathura. This was probably the first time in the kingdom's history that a chariot race was being arranged. After all, wherever there was Krishna, new things happened.

It was heartening to see the enthusiasm of all the participants. There was just one topic of discussion all over Mathura—the chariot race. I had asked Brihaddal to specially invite all the Yadava leaders, including Satrajit, to watch this race. Everybody was under the illusion that it was a mere chariot race. Not a soul knew the real reason why I had organised this event. Thinking of this, many a times, I would laugh to myself for hours at night. What intricate, far-reaching and cunning plans I had begun to devise! Really, with the passage of time, I was becoming very dangerous. How many schemes did I not concoct! Perhaps this was the reason why the discus was my favourite weapon. Very often, I would think, 'What if all this convoluted scheming made me forget to do things in a straightforward manner?'

Slowly, the day of the competition was drawing close. My preparations were already in full swing and until now, everything was going according to the plan. On one hand, I had instructed scores of my own soldiers to be armed and present at the chariot race, and on the other, I had also instructed around a hundred of the best soldiers from the palace to be deputed on duty. Concurrently, something else was also happening, which was not a part of my plan. These days, I had to use my smile to the fullest. My smile too was an amazing weapon

in my arsenal. Whenever somebody asked why I was holding the chariot race, I would simply smile and silence the question. It is simple, when one does not want to give a straight answer to a question, one has to evade the question with a smile. Incidentally, just like me, my smile had a thousand forms; it possessed myriad talents. It was a great help to me on every occasion. Whenever I wanted to hide something or lie blatantly, my smile would come to my rescue. If I wanted to confound somebody, I had no better weapon than my smile. Why just this, if I wanted to create doubt in someone's mind or instigate somebody, then my smile would accomplish it with astonishing ease. The amazing thing about it was that neither could anyone understand its mystery, nor could anyone save themselves from its disarming influence.

So, even as I lavishly displayed my smile in this manner, the day of the chariot race finally arrived. I had reached the venue of the contest quite early. Naturally, the contest had been arranged far from the city at a huge ground, close to the main highway. As expected, all of Mathura had thronged to see the race. There was much infectious enthusiasm among the people. The ground was filled to capacity. This was not all, there were thousands more thronging and jostling on both sides of the main road, along which the chariots were to race. More than a hundred chariots were participating in the competition. Brihaddal had come along with his mentor, Satrajit. All the prominent Yadava leaders were also there well in time. Even grandfather had reached the ground with bhaiya. All in all, everybody's enthusiasm was at its peak. And why would it not be? After all, this was the first time that Mathura was having such a grand celebration after their dear Brihaddal's coronation as prince.

When the mood was set, and when I saw around two thousand spectators all ready to watch the contest, I too became completely alert. At this moment, I was seated along with grandfather, bhaiya, Brihaddal, Satrajit and the other Yadava leaders on a stage constructed adjacent to the highway. In front of us, around a hundred chariots stood ready in a line. And the huge crowd surrounding them could be seen even from here. Meaning, the mood had been set, and now, it was useless to wait any longer. The arrangements for this chariot race were in my hands. So, I inaugurated the competition with a formal speech. My speech was nothing else but the final phase of my plan. Standing up at my place on the podium, I said, "I am happy that such a grand chariot race is being organised under the leadership of our Prince Brihaddal. For this, I first want to congratulate our prince. I proudly recall the moment when, at the time of his coronation, Prince Brihaddal had acquainted us with the determination and courage hidden within him. I am sure, all of you clearly remember how, on the day he was crowned, the prince had promised to protect the pride and glory of Mathura

under all circumstances. That was not all, he had even vowed to sever the head of anybody who dared to challenge Mathura. And, just see the work of Nature! Today, our dear prince has got an opportunity to display his valour and make good on his promise to Mathura!”

On hearing my words, there was an instant buzz in the surprised audience. Everybody was wondering what this new threat to Mathura’s glory could be, which could compel their prince to display his bravery. Naturally, Satrajit and Brihaddal’s camp was caught in a vortex of unknown fear. They wondered what possible threat required this bravery, about which they knew nothing, while Krishna was aware of it? Even grandfather was looking at me with surprise. Nobody could understand what the matter was. Now, how could anyone understand the import of Krishna’s words, unless Krishna himself explained it? In fact, this was the final move in my strategy, which I had made with the express purpose of knocking everyone out. However, I thought it better to unveil the mystery without keeping the people in the dark for too long. So, I continued dramatically, “This morning, I received news from grandfather, that a *swayamvar* for Rukmini, the Princess of Kundinpur, is scheduled to be held. But alas, Mathura has not been invited! It is an affront to Mathura, and especially to its Crown Prince Brihaddal.” Then, raising my voice, I said, almost screaming, “Prince Brihaddal will certainly not tolerate this humiliation!”

Saying this, I provoked the crowd to shout slogans such as, “Glory to Brihaddal! Glory to Mathura and its crown prince who will ride on the fastest chariot and avenge Mathura!” The crowd got electrified. Then, people began shouting slogans in favour of the prince and Mathura from all around the venue. Brihaddal, Satrajit and the other Yadavas leaders just could not understand what had hit them. They were wondering, ‘Where did this news of Rukmini’s *swayamvar* come from and what was the connection between it and Brihaddal’s vow to save Mathura’s glory?’ The situation was comical indeed. The members of Satrajit’s camp were cowering, while the inhabitants of Mathura were in raptures. What was comical about this pathetic scene, was that as the enthusiasm of the crowd increased, the nervousness and fear in Satrajit’s camp shot alarmingly higher. For some time, I stood there thoroughly enjoying this spectacle. Truly speaking, I wanted to laugh on seeing Brihaddal and Satrajit in such a state of confusion. Deep within, I was elated that so far, everything was going according to plan. But there still were many layers of the plan left to be uncovered. This was certainly not the time to watch the drama or get carried away by emotions. I still had to pull my enemies out of uncertainty and push them into a deep abyss of fear.

Thus, immediately making my final move, I got Brihaddal, who was

sitting close by, to stand up and then, raising his hand, I announced, “Everybody, please be quiet. Our Crown Prince Brihaddal can understand your feelings. He is committed to do anything it takes, to safeguard the glory of Mathura. Now, this *swayamvar* is being conducted under the supervision of King Jarasandha. But, so what? Our prince does not care about this minor issue. In fact, my personal opinion is that our prince is extremely lucky to get this wonderful opportunity to fulfill his pledge, and that too, so quickly. We want our brave crown prince to leave for Kundinpur right away, taking all the chariots and soldiers with him, and to protect the glory of Mathura, either by stopping the *swayamvar*, or by kidnapping Rukmini and bringing her to Mathura. We all know this has been the practice adopted for centuries, to safeguard the glory of a kingdom which is not invited for a *swayamvar*. I firmly believe that even our crown prince will not back down.”

Hearing this, the naïve crowd once again began shouting slogans glorifying Brihaddal, but this time, with double the fervour. Satrajit gave me a very spiteful look. Clearly, it was only he who understood my strategy better than anyone else. So what if he did? I was now ready for my final strike. Very calmly, I continued my speech, “Since this *swayamvar* is being conducted under Jarasandha’s supervision, it is quite likely that our crown prince might have to face Jarasandha’s ire. Even so, I am convinced that to protect the honour of Mathura, our brave Prince Brihaddal will not even hesitate to behead the great Jarasandha!”

With this, I once again shouted, “Glory to Brihaddal!” This acted like fuel to the crowd’s enthusiasm. The people took up the chant zealously. After all, it was a question of the honour of Mathura. Soon, the entire ground resounded with slogans glorifying my dear brother Brihaddal, the crown prince of Mathura. To tell you the truth, tears welled up in my eyes on seeing the respect being accorded to this brother of mine. It was natural that I would become misty-eyed on hearing them cheer my brother so lustily. But what was this? Brihaddal was trembling with fright. As for his mentor Satrajit, he appeared paralysed. None of the Yadava leaders could understand what they should do now.

The situation was quite awkward. All around the venue of the chariot race, the crowd was roaring, demanding that the prince salvage Mathura’s honour. And on the dais, sat that very prince, frozen with fright. Just one move by Krishna had forced Jarasandha’s minions to come and stand against Jarasandha himself; the poor men were badly trapped. If they withdrew, they would lose face in Mathura. If they accepted the challenge and raced off to display their bravery, then death at the hands of Jarasandha was certain. Between the devil and the deep blue sea; that is where Krishna’s deviousness had landed

these poor people! The bone was stuck in their throats in such a manner, that neither could they swallow it, nor spit it out. Seeing how brilliantly my devious plan had succeeded, my theatrical abilities came rushing to the fore. Thus, I walked towards Brihaddal, dramatically threw an arm around his shoulders and said, "Come, my brave prince. Smash Jarasandha's pride. All of Mathura is with you. Indeed, it is anxious to see you off."

On hearing this, he broke down. In tears, he said, "I do not want to be the crown prince of Mathura!"

Well, could he not understand all this when I had been clearly explaining it to him earlier? And now, he had understood it so well, that immediately after saying this, he fled from the ground. Seeing him running away in this manner, people began to jeer at him. As for Satrajit and the other Yadava leaders, they sank into their seats, holding their heads. Their plan and their pawn, both had been beaten badly. And with this, all their plans of taking over the kingdom of Mathura were destroyed as well. The entire ground was plunged in gloom with the fleeing of Brihaddal. The despair at their prince being a coward was palpable among the crowd. Satrajit's prestige had been reduced to dust. He could not raise his head, and it hung in shame. I had broken his stranglehold over Mathura, but this was not going to resolve the problem related to Rukmini. But yes, in this plan, I had a move ready for that problem as well. If I managed to do everything, but still could not save the light of my life, then what was the use? And since this final move concerned me and my 'life', I played it very carefully.

Thus, I raised both my hands and calmed down the crowd. Then, addressing them, I said, "Please do not feel so dejected. If Brihaddal cannot safeguard the honour of Mathura, I will have to shoulder this responsibility. For, if someone dares to threaten Mathura's honour, especially someone like Jarasandha, I just cannot tolerate it. No! Never! And besides, as all of you know, I have already fought and defeated this very same Jarasandha not once, but twice. I will do so again!"

Hearing my powerful speech, the gloom that had descended on the ground lifted. Sheer enthusiasm filled the crowd, and chants glorifying me began to resound throughout the ground. Shouts of "Mathura's hero was, is and always will be only Krishna!" could be heard everywhere. Well, there was truth in these statements, no doubt about that. However, right now, I did not care to hear slogans glorifying me or Brihaddal being jeered at. I was more interested in rescuing my beloved. So, I immediately set off for Kundinpur with an army of about a hundred chariots and a posse of soldiers and servants to save Rukmini, the queen of my dreams.

Needless to add, the enthused inhabitants of Mathura gave me a hero's

send-off. Of course, the innocent people had no way of knowing that there was not even the ghost of a chance that I, who had never fought even for my own honour, would rush off to safeguard Mathura's honour! The poor simpletons had no idea that Krishna had fooled them and was rushing off to Kundinpur to save the queen of his dreams. Indeed, what a plan I had hatched! I had not used a single weapon, and all my enemies were knocked out. Hats off to you Krishna, you devise such devious plans! To tell you the truth, I was feeling rather proud of myself today.

And so, our chariots raced off to Kundinpur. All the soldiers and charioteers were bursting at the seams with enthusiasm! And, why would they not? After all, they were getting a splendid opportunity to save the honour of Mathura! The poor people did not know that I was using them to save my dream girl - Rukmini. Did you see the trick I played? In the name of Mathura, it was a game played by and for Krishna! Now, let me tell you a secret. I had not hoodwinked just Satrajit, the Yadava leaders and the citizens of Mathura. I had to dupe bhaiya as well.³⁵ Actually, I did not want to take bhaiya along on this trip. For, taking him with me on such a delicate mission could easily prove to be an albatross around my neck. Thus, it had become necessary to trick him too. Poor bhaiya, I had told him that in the current circumstances, it was not advisable for both of us to leave Mathura together. What could I do, pulling the wool over his eyes was the demand of the moment. For, if I had brought him along and if the situation had compelled me to kidnap Rukmini, I knew for certain that he would have indirectly become an obstacle in my path. And I did not want to take any chances in matters concerning Rukmini. As of now, she was not only my dream, but she was also my very life. And there was just no question of Krishna taking chances with his life. As such, there was another side to this matter as well. Bhaiya could have proved helpful if he knew what was in my heart. But, both bhaiya and Uddhava were unaware of this particular storm that was raging in my heart. For that matter, even Rukmini was not aware of it herself. In short, your dear Kanhaiya was terribly caught in the whirlpool of a one-sided love affair!

However, there was one thing that I was assured of. Thanks to the fine trap that I had laid for Satrajit and his puppet, Prince Brihaddal, and the ignominy that had fallen to their lot, it made me feel that at least for the time being, the problem of the Yadava leaders had been dealt with. For that matter, had I left them in a position to raise their bowed heads anytime soon? All in all, I was feeling very pleased with the respite that I had got in Mathura. I felt very proud of myself as well. But this was all about Mathura; speaking of Kundinpur,

my mind was still engulfed by a thousand misgivings over the situation there. For, the success of this entire plan hinged on being able to rescue Rukmini. After all, the primary objective of this entire ploy was saving the life of the 'light of my life'. And that was not so easy. Now, what do I tell you? I had set off on this journey at great risk to my life, but entering Jarasandha's stronghold with these hundred-odd soldiers and rescuing Rukmini from his clutches seemed to be nothing but sheer audacity. What if it turned out that having lost my mind because of my love for Rukmini, I was handing Jarasandha the chance for which he had been waiting all these years, all on a platter? What if I could not save the light of my life and instead, end up losing my own dear life as well?

'Krishna! You are becoming despondent,' a voice within cautioned me. Now, if negative thoughts crowd one's mind, one is sure to be engulfed in despair. I immediately filled my mind with positive thoughts, 'O my brave warrior, when you had killed Panchajanya and Shringlava in their stronghold, with nothing in your favour, then of what consequence is Jarasandha? Trust me, for a master strategist like you, it is not a difficult task to be able to save the light of your life while also saving your own life.' No sooner had these positive thoughts filled my mind than I gradually regained confidence. And at the same time, I also vowed to myself that I would not let Rukmini be forcefully married to Shishupala under any circumstances. I loved her more dearly than life itself; I was now willing to risk my very own life to save her. Just see, I was back to where I had started. Killing was one thing, but where did all these morbid thoughts of dying come from? It was one thing to die for Rukmini, but that did not mean that I could let myself be killed by my arch-enemy, Jarasandha. At any rate, where was the question of killing or being killed here? Such a small army was not going to be of any use in a battle. All I could do at the most, was perhaps create an obstacle and have this *swayamvar* stopped. At the same time, there was no question of kidnapping Rukmini either. For, as things stood right now, neither did I consider myself worthy of her, nor did I have a palace or kingdom where I could keep her. Thus, in the current situation, my biggest success would be to stop the *swayamvar* somehow. If I could stop Rukmini from being married off and return to Mathura alive, I would consider my mission successful. Great! My plan had become perfectly clear while thinking of a strategy.

Anyway, on the fifth day, our small army reached the outskirts of Kundinpur. I had been lost in thoughts to such an extent, that I just do not remember how the journey had passed. Upon reaching the outskirts of this kingdom, we took shelter in an *ashram*. We were tired after the continuous journey, and besides, I did not think it was wise to enter an unknown city at

night. But there was nothing to be gained by waiting unnecessarily either. Thus, the next day, we rode into Kundinpur early in the morning. The grand procession of a hundred chariots took everybody by great surprise. Consequently, the news of my arrival spread like wildfire all over Kundinpur. This was what I wanted. That is why I had entered the city so early in the morning, with such a splendid caravan. So, I kept this stately procession moving up and down the various streets of Kundinpur for hours together. Wherever our caravan turned, a number of people would crowd in to see us. My objective was clear. I wanted to spread the news of my arrival not only to Jarasandha and Rukmini, but also to the common people of Kundinpur, as soon as possible. By afternoon, I had successfully even achieved this objective. The news had spread like wildfire all over the kingdom. Eventually, by evening, we retired to a splendid guest house, right in the heart of the city.

Now, Rukmini's *swayamvar* was eight days away. But my problem was that I could not go to the court of King Bhishmak straightaway. It was not as if I had been invited to the *swayamvar* that I could just march into the court. What I mean to say is, I was entirely bereft of the king's hospitality. Naturally, I was enacting all this drama to somehow let him know of my arrival and wrangle an invitation for myself. Of course, I also knew very well that the arrangements for the *swayamvar* were in the hands of Jarasandha, so I would not get invited so easily. But what reassured me was the fact that though the reins of the *swayamvar* were in his hands, it was King Bhishmak who had to follow royal protocol. And as the *swayamvar* was of his own daughter, it was his prestige which was at stake. Now, Bhishmak was not such a weak king that he could be compelled to agree with whatever Jarasandha said. And to tell you the truth, it was only because of this conviction that I had made the audacious decision of coming here. Irrespective of whether Bhishmak would be able to invite me or not, it was certain that he would not give Jarasandha the opportunity to indulge in any kind of misadventure against me. Meaning, Bhishmak would bind him by royal protocol and prevent him from seeking revenge. What I mean to say is that despite entering the lion's den, I was perfectly safe. If that had not been the case, do you think I had taken leave of my senses to have come so far just to die?

Well, I was relieved of being safe, but I was still anxious about Rukmini. And at this moment, I was worried sick about her. From that perspective, the good news was that my move had proved successful. My arrival, with a splendid caravan in tow, had forced the royal palace to invite me. After all, it was not possible to continue ignoring the hero who had twice defeated Jarasandha and killed the likes of Panchajanya and Shringlava. The very next day, the Deputy Commander of the Kundinpur army came to see me bearing gifts from King

Bhishmak. Oh well! At least, my arrival was being acknowledged, and I was accorded this respect.

But wait, what was this? This man, the Deputy Commander, looked very familiar. Then it dawned on me the next moment. He was my dear friend Shwetketu, a classmate from *Acharya* Sandipani's *ashram*! My heart leapt with joy on seeing him. This was the very first time since I was born, that Nature had favoured me with unsolicited kindness. This was certainly an unexpected blessing. Also, the arrival of gifts from King Bhishmak, despite the entire arrangement for the *swayamvar* being in the hands of King Jarasandha, spelt another great breakthrough. Thus, by the second day of my arrival itself, I had received two pieces of great news from the kingdom of my beloved. One, the king's adherence to the royal protocol was proof of my safety, and secondly, the Deputy Commander of the enemy turning out to be my friend was like a bright ray of hope for the future.

But time was short and there was much to be done. After spending a few moments catching up, I gently came to the point. Upon enquiry, I learnt that Shwetketu had been in King Bhishmak's service for the past one and a half years as his Deputy Commander. There could not be any happier news for me than this. His being in such an important position was tantamount to my secretly entering the royal palace. Now it was child's play for me to know exactly what the palace was thinking. Indeed, it is said that if you know beforehand what the enemy is thinking and planning to do, then half the battle is as good as won. At this moment, this seemed to be precisely the case with me. Proof of this was that I had very easily wormed out many secrets of the royal palace from Shwetketu. In a way, he had opened the doors of victory for me. Shwetketu revealed that the *swayamvar* was being conducted upon the insistence of Jarasandha and Rukmi. King Bhishmak was not at all in favour of it. But he was helpless before Rukmi's insistence. Such being the situation, the only person who could help Rukmini was grandfather Kaishik. He was so strongly against force being used by Jarasandha and Rukmi, that he had apparently even walked out of the palace in protest and was now living at a nearby *ashram*. It appeared that at present, Rukmini too was close only to him. In fact, she poured out her sorrows only to her grandfather Kaishik.

On hearing about the entire situation, I felt multiple emotions coursing through me at the same time, and for some time, several thoughts also kept flitting across my mind. However, all said and done, the news was good. Firstly, Rukmini was not happy with the *swayamvar* and secondly, from a political point of view, it was good news that her grandfather himself was against this wedding. However, if I saw the wider picture, the increasing clout of unruly sons in

Aryavarta was truly a cause for worry. In Hastinapur, King Dhritarashtra was being browbeaten by his uncontrollable son, Crown Prince Duryodhana, while here, King Bhishmak was helpless in front of his son, Rukmi. King Dumghosh too had to bow down to the wishes of his son, Shishupala. And in Mathura, Kansa had usurped the throne of Mathura after having his father, King Ugrasena, thrown into prison! What worried me was, would this ongoing struggle for the throne and for dominance between the fathers and sons lead to the downfall of the entire Aryavarta one day?

Just see! I had set out thinking and worrying about Rukmini, but my mind had wandered off and was now caught up in thinking for the greater good! However, I immediately controlled myself. Was this the time to worry about the greater good? I thought, ‘My dear Kanhaiya, first think about yourself and the light of your life. What is the use of worrying about the future right now?’ With this thought, I immediately returned to the topic of Rukmini. Actually, Shwetketu had not told me much about her, and as a result, I could no longer contain my curiosity. I straightaway asked him for information about her. What he revealed upset me even more. Rukmini was very distressed by this forced *swayamvar*. She had expressed her anger and opposition to this ceremony a thousand times, but to no avail. And apparently, she was now thoroughly exhausted and constantly crying. But despite this, the hard-hearted Rukmi did not care. And, even if he did feel pity for her at times, he found himself helpless in front of Jarasandha and Shishupala, who were controlling him to a large extent. And now, as a final attempt to pressurise them, the poor Rukmini had stopped eating and drinking since the previous day. She was thinking that perhaps this would help. I felt greatly distressed on hearing all this. How could a lover not be miserable when the life of his beloved was in danger?

Well, this was the end of our informal conversation. And it was only now that Shwetketu remembered his errand and asked me the reason for coming to Kundinpur. After all, the King had sent him here just for that express purpose. This was great. I had asked everything I wanted to and had gleaned all that I needed to know from him, but he was still clueless as to why I was asking him all these questions! Well, he would know only if I told him, right? However, even I had a problem. What could I tell him? He was such a good friend. I could tell him exactly what was in my heart. Indeed, at this point, he was like my saviour, and it was not good to keep secrets from one’s saviour. But then I thought, there was a lot of time to reveal my heart’s desire to him. But first, it was imperative that I sent a no-nonsense, politically correct message to the King. Thus, I answered, “Actually, Mathura did not receive an invitation for the *swayamvar*. Perhaps we were not invited upon Jarasandha’s instructions. Even

so, Mathura considers it an insult. Thus, I have come here with a posse of soldiers to express our indignation over this humiliation and of course, to get the ceremony cancelled.”

Shwetketu was dumbfounded. He realised that his friend Krishna had come here with a very dangerous intention. Well, whatever my intent was, he had come here to find out the purpose behind my visit, and he had done that. But while leaving, he gave me the good news that he had got married recently. I was happy for him and congratulated him heartily. Shwetketu left soon after that, and he had reassured me to a large extent. After all, it is natural to feel reassured on finding a friendly face in enemy territory.

This also had a positive effect on my sleep. There was no restlessness, and I had a very sound sleep. After a good night's sleep, my energy level was rather high the next day. As soon as the sun rose, I went out to explore the town of Kundinpur. I thought that the King's reaction to my message would come when it was due, till then, why not find out what the common people thought of the *swayamvar*? Within a single day of roaming around the city, I found that the people of Kundinpur were not particularly happy about this ceremony. On the contrary, most were displeased with prince Rukmi. They were unhappy about their darling princess being forced to marry against her wishes. Actually, this did clear up the air to some extent, for I too was wondering that when the princess was getting married, how was it possible for the entire city to not be in a celebratory mood? Even so, this unhappiness of the people was good for me. My enthusiasm rocketed sky-high on realising that not just the King and the grandfather, but even the people of the kingdom were completely against the *swayamvar*. When I had left from Mathura, there was just darkness everywhere. There did not seem to be a single ray of hope. But now, after just two days in Kundinpur, things were beginning to look bright indeed. Naturally, my happiness knew no bounds. I was now impatiently waiting for Shwetketu to get back to me after having met the King and given him my reply. Naturally, my next step hinged on the King's reaction to my message.

I did not have to wait for long; Shwetketu arrived on time. But the moment I opened the door to welcome him, I was stunned. His wife was none other than Shaivya, whom I had adopted as my sister not so long back. I was astonished to see her; she too was dumbfounded on seeing me. The atmosphere became joyous with this reunion of a brother and his sister. I too became convinced that Nature was truly with me. That was precisely why so many of my friends were appearing, one after another in this unknown city. Shaivya spoke first. She asked, “Brother Krishna, is it really you?”

On hearing her voice, I came to my senses, otherwise I would have

remained lost in thought. I immediately ushered them inside. And as they entered, I replied in my unique style, “Yes sister, it is really me, Krishna!”

Seeing us talking in this familiar manner, now it was Shwetketu’s turn to be stunned. Naturally, Shaivya’s close bond with me was nothing less than a surprise for him. More remarkably, even though we had met for political reasons, now there was a family atmosphere. We sat down together on the bed. In the course of the conversation, Shaivya revealed that it was she who had got Shwetketu appointed as Deputy Commander of the forces at Karvirpur. Eventually, they had fallen in love and later got married. But after marriage, Shwetketu did not want to remain in Karvirpur as the Deputy Commander. His self-respect would not allow him to do so. Thus, both of them had come to Kundinpur. Shaivya also told me that she had become a dear friend of Rukmini. Now, this was news that really interested me. In fact, there was nothing better than this news for me. Really, when Nature’s wish is in sync with yours, everything becomes so easy. That is why, it is said that fate has a thousand hands.

When I learnt of Shaivya’s closeness to Rukmini, I revealed to both of them what was in my heart. This was the first time I had told anybody of my love for Rukmini. Hearing that I, her brother, was in love with Rukmini, Shaivya was beside herself with joy. But within moments, her happiness turned into anxiety. Rukmini’s *swayamvar* was to be held soon. Moreover, it was being done against her wishes, and as if this was not enough, her health was also deteriorating steadily. Unburdening all her worries, she looked at me helplessly. The very manner in which Shaivya looked at me, pushed me into the depths of despair too. I could not understand how any father or brother—and that too, not an ordinary person, but a King—could come under pressure and get his darling daughter married to an evil man like Shishupala. To tell you the truth, Rukmini’s present suffering was making life unbearable for me. I wanted to go and console her, but unfortunately, this was not possible. I had never felt so helpless before. Moreover, Shwetketu had not been able to gauge the King’s reaction to my message either. Actually, the King’s opinion did not hold much weight. He depended on Jarasandha to a great extent. And the latter had made his intentions concerning me very clear.

However, right now, Shwetketu did not have any news for me. His visit today was prompted by purely personal reasons. Also, there were just six days left for the *swayamvar* now, and they had lots to do. So, they left after promising to come back the next day with fresh information. And as for me, what can I say? I was left alone, feeling deeply curious about the future. The biggest problem was that I could not plan my next step until I had some idea about the

royal palace's reaction to my arrival. Meaning, despite being mired in all kinds of troubles, I still had to wait for fresh information from Shwetketu. On the other hand, it was also possible that on hearing that I had arrived, my three sworn enemies, Jarasandha, Shishupala and Rukmi, had become enraged and had even made up a plan to eliminate me. Though I was prepared for any such unexpected attack, there was almost no possibility of my being attacked in Kundinpur. I could say this with such conviction because I had not come here for war, but to register Mathura's protest. And this move was Mathura's political right. From this perspective, I was King Bhishmak's royal guest, even though I was an uninvited one. Therefore, if anything happened to me here, then King Bhishmak would be disgraced in all of Aryavarta. It would create a big wave of opposition against Jarasandha too and that, in turn, would undoubtedly ruin his plans to become the emperor of Aryavarta.

In short, I was confident that Bhishmak, who was a politically astute King, would not support any childish suggestion given by the politically immature Shishupala or Rukmi. This reckoning was the only reason behind my calmness. To tell you the truth, it was based on this assessment alone that I had entered the jaws of death in the first place. The circumstances were such that neither could they attack me, nor could they protest my presence. In fact, they could not even order me out of the kingdom. On the other hand, it was not at all easy for them to tolerate my presence in Kundinpur either. Meaning, I had proved to be a bone stuck in their throats, which they could neither swallow nor spit out. However, all these considerations, though amusing, were definitely not important right now. The paramount task before me was to stop Rukmini's *swayamvar*, and this problem remained exactly as it was, with all its complexities. Even after so many positive developments had occurred, I had not been able to think of any solution to that problem. Meanwhile, it was also certain that after learning about the purpose of my arrival, the security at the venue of the *swayamvar* would be beefed up to such an extent that it would be insane to even think of abducting Rukmini now. Meaning, all the good news that I had received since my arrival was really of no practical significance. None of it pointed out to a way in which Rukmini could be rescued.

What do I tell you about my condition? I spent the entire day restlessly pacing up and down in my chamber, lost in these thoughts. And the only ray of hope for me was that Shwetketu would bring some positive news about the King's reaction to my arrival. And that had not happened yet. I wasted the entire day waiting for him to come, and my night was given over to tossing restlessly in bed. But enough was enough; I could not waste these precious days just twiddling my thumbs waiting for the King's reaction. Come what may, I had to

stop the *swayamvar* under all circumstances. I thought that even though I may not be able to change the royal palace's intention, I could very well inflame the public sentiment against it and indirectly put pressure on it. At any rate, when there was nothing else to do, this was the least I could do. So, the next day, I immediately got down to this task. For the next two days, I instigated the people against the *swayamvar*. I was very easily able to provoke the people, who were already disgruntled about the *swayamvar*, by explaining to them that the princess did not represent merely the prestige of the King but that of the entire kingdom. And I also told them that Princess Rukmini should not only be considered their own daughter, but there must also be strong protests against her being forced to marry a rogue against her wishes. Finally, my efforts paid off. Soon, voices denouncing the *swayamvar* began to be heard from various pockets of Kundinpur. The protests were so vociferous that they shook up the very walls of the royal palace. As for the people, when they could be so easily instigated even for a wrong thing, then was it difficult to get them provoked over something that was right? All it needed was a few emotionally charged words, accompanied by a suitably sad face, and they were fired up. Moreover, I had given them an extremely poignant description of Rukmini's condition. How could the sentimental people of Kundinpur see their darling princess in such a plight? They were bound to get enraged.

My plan proved successful. The same royal palace, which had been studiously ignoring me so far, had now sent me a formal invitation. Shwetketu came with an invitation from King Bhishmak himself. Naturally, the people's recalcitrant protests had put more pressure on the already weakened Bhishmak. The King himself was not in favour of the *swayamvar* anyway. This had perhaps given him the chance to hear what he wanted to. For, it is generally very easy for the palace to ignore trivial protests by the people. But not in this case; my work was done and I was elated. Wild with happiness, I embraced Shwetketu and kissed his cheeks a few times. My plan to put pressure on the royal palace had really had its desired effect. Now that the door to discussions had been opened, the other doors would also open on their own. This was certainly a big victory for me. I was feeling justifiably proud about this too. Really, my plans never failed. Perhaps, my determination was so strong that circumstances just had to give in to my wishes.

Actually, another factor that was responsible for my perennial success was that as long as there was some option available, I never accepted defeat, even under the most difficult situations. I never lost hope. I made it a point to clearly understand the ground reality, analyse it rightly, and then do everything I could with all my strength, and that too, without the slightest tinge of selfish

interest. That being the case, tell me, why would I not be able to achieve the desired outcome?

I knew that the likes of Rukmi and Jarasandha would never get pressurised by the public. But King Bhishmak had the responsibility of running the kingdom. He could not ignore the public beyond a point. He had to respect their wishes under any circumstances. Indeed, the people's revolt had quickly accomplished what I had been waiting for since the time I had arrived. King Bhishmak's formal invitation had laid the foundation for my eventual victory in this battle for my love. After all, since the time I had come here what else had I wanted? I had just wished to be invited to the palace and have someone talk to me. For, I knew that if someone spoke to me or discussed something with me, then I could turn every tide in my favour. I had indeed been anxiously waiting to visit the palace ever since I had arrived in Kundinpur. Now that the moment I had been yearning for had arrived, what was the point in delaying it anymore? I quickly got ready and left with Shwetketu. I had set off in all my glory and with complete confidence. Shwetketu had come with four chariots to take me to the palace. Not to be left behind, I accompanied him with more than a score of my own chariots in tow. After all, I was going to my in-laws' house, so I had to go in style. Well, jokes apart, this was the day of judgement. This was the real test of my eloquence, and I was more than ready for it.

In stark contrast to my expectations, the court was filled with kings and princes. I had thought I would be taken straightaway to speak to King Bhishmak, but there was an entire royal assembly over here. Perhaps, Bhishmak wanted to take all the decisions in front of everyone, so that no one could raise a finger on him later. No matter the reason, thanks to this attempt of his, my eloquence was to be put to its ultimate test right now. It was easy to prevail upon Bhishmak alone, but to persuade all the kings and princes...Well, no matter; my most beloved friend Jarasandha was there to increase my enthusiasm! In fact, he was seated there with an air of immense pride. The height of his throne itself indicated his special status. His acolytes, Shishupala and Rukmi, were seated on either side of him. Seeing my foes seated there so proudly with their evil intentions, my enthusiasm was bound to soar. Indeed, I had a very simple principle; the higher the waves were, the more expertly I swam. Meaning, the grimmer the situation was, the more astute and agile I became. The proof of this was that my humorous nature had not abandoned me, even in such a difficult situation. I glanced at Jarasandha and gave him my most supercilious half-smile, as if he was just a lowly minion. For that matter, even Jarasandha had not discarded his usual demeanour. He stared at me fiercely, as if he would eat me alive. But what difference did it make to me? No matter what Jarasandha's status

in Aryavarta was; no matter what his position in Bhishmak's court was, as far as I was concerned, he was just an ordinary King, who while fighting against me, had fled from the battle on two occasions. Now tell me, would I perceive Jarasandha in my own way or would I go by what the world thought of him?

Well, I was watching this entire scene, standing at the entrance. The entire court too was busy looking at me. The kings and princes of other kingdoms, in particular, were taking a special interest in sizing me up. An ordinary cowherd boy, who was not more than twenty-four years old, was standing in front of such powerful kings as a distinguished personality. To tell you the truth, my ego soared to an all-time high at the very thought of this. On the other hand, the condition of the kings and princes of the other kingdoms was no less strange. They kept looking at me and then at Jarasandha, as if trying to compare our respective strengths. Looking at me, they found it hard to believe that this mere lad had defeated Jarasandha twice. And interestingly, even Jarasandha was not oblivious to these glances of comparison that were being levelled at us. In his heart of hearts, he was feeling vexed, but he was a seasoned King, so he kept his silence.

Anyway, let us forget about him for now and let me talk about King Bhishmak, in whose royal court I was now present. He left nothing lacking in following the protocol and offered me a seat as soon as I reached there. This was the first time that I was getting the opportunity to sit with so many kings. Naturally, I could not contain my elation on receiving such an honour. This was certainly a matter of great pride for an ordinary cowherd boy. And I too was taking it as an opportunity. If I managed to make an impact on this royal court, then it was certain that this cowherd boy would be accepted as a King. Sensing that, I too observed protocol, just like a seasoned King. Before I took my seat, I paid my respects to King Bhishmak. Then I offered respects to Jarasandha and the other kings and only then did this cowherd boy take his seat in style, among the other kings of the region. Honestly speaking, this single gesture made me feel worthy of Rukmini. If nothing else, this delusion at least raised my enthusiasm instantly and many times over. In fact, my enthusiasm was all that I could bank on in this difficult situation.

Well, time would tell whether this was true or not. As soon as I sat down, a palpable silence descended over the entire court. Evidently, everything had been discussed at length well before my arrival. Everybody's presence there was proof of this fact. Obviously, the matter could not be solved by either Bhishmak or Jarasandha; that was why I had been called before the entire assembly of kings. And of course, Jarasandha, Rukmi and Shishupala were not happy to see me here. Well, that did not matter. Meanwhile, as was my habit, I tried to look

Jarasandha straight in his eyes several times, but he refused to meet my gaze. However, despite this, he was not able to hide his simmering rage. The silence continued to prevail in the court. Since it was King Bhishmak's court, it was his prerogative to begin the proceedings. But it seemed that he was at a loss for words. I thought, what if this silence continued till it was time for the *swayamvar*? So, I soon lost my patience. At any rate, it was better to say all that I wanted to in my own way, before Bhishmak parroted the words put into his mouth by Jarasandha! With this thought, I stood up from where I was seated and addressing King Bhishmak with complete self-confidence, I began, "O king, I thank you for this invitation. But I believe I should have received this invitation the moment I entered Kundinpur."

My opening statement was so impertinent that it left Bhishmak and everyone else speechless. It also managed to create a great first impression on this imposing assembly of kings. To my amusement, King Bhishmak completely lost his equilibrium with my first strike itself and becoming completely flustered, he said, "Well... actually, I was about to send you an invitation but then..."

I refused to let him complete his statement. When his tongue had slipped, why would I not use it to the utmost? I cut him short with a laugh, saying, "But Jarasandha did not approve of it. Well, so what? You know very well that we are old friends. And as far as I know, you are still the King of Kundinpur."

Jarasandha showed his maturity by managing to remain silent even after my biting sarcasm, but Rukmi got riled up. Well, it hardly mattered. Who cared about him anyway? Besides, now that I was regarded as an equal, I had simultaneously also acquired the right to speak as an equal. Indeed, only if I spoke as an equal would I be convinced that I was an equal to all these kings. However, by now, King Bhishmak had completely regained his composure. This time, he did not react at all to this sarcastic comment of mine. This is what maturity is all about. On the contrary, he took up the reins of the conversation and started it afresh. Ignoring my cutting sarcasm, he said very calmly, "Kundinpur is like your own kingdom. You may come and go whenever you wish. But I have not been able to understand the purpose behind your arrival for Rukmini's *swayamvar*."

I laughed and retorted quickly, "O King, you do know, but are pretending that you do not. Everybody is aware that you have not invited Mathura for this *swayamvar*. So, what other option did you leave me with, other than coming here as an uninvited guest?" Did you notice, now that I had got this opportunity to sit with kings, I had come completely into my element. And when I was in this great mood and Jarasandha was seated in front of me, it was natural for me to feel like needling him. Actually, I wanted to annoy him and make him lose his

composure. With this objective in mind, I pretended to sympathise with King Bhishmak and said dramatically, “It appears that you have committed the audacious act of not inviting Mathura under the influence of some foolish people, whom Mathura has cut down to size many times!”

I said what I had to, but the very next moment, I realised that what I had said was too much. But, so what? It did have the effect that I had hoped for. Hearing my sarcastic comments, Jarasandha went wild with rage. He instantly shot up from his seat and unsheathed his sword. The entire court froze. Perfect! I had got precisely the reaction that I wanted. An opponent does not make a mistake until his anger is aroused. This was as far as the interaction between Jarasandha and me was concerned. But on seeing the atmosphere become tense, King Bhishmak’s face became furrowed with worry. He somehow managed to calm Jarasandha by making a thousand entreaties. I could barely conceal my amusement at seeing Jarasandha’s condition. The one who held unquestionable sway over the entire Aryavarta had been humiliated by an ordinary cowherd boy, but all he could do was bear it quietly! Tell me, how could I not feel like laughing? Having pacified Jarasandha, King Bhishmak spoke to me with some irritation, “It will be better if you say what you want to, instead of repeatedly passing sarcastic remarks.”

I thought, ‘All right then, I will give you a piece of my mind. The king’s wish is my command.’ This time around, I spoke very gravely, “All of you know that I have come here merely to register my protest. If an invitation had been extended to Mathura, I would not have had to come here at all. For, neither Mathura nor I have any interest in Rukmini. Therefore, my visit should be seen as one undertaken for purely political reasons and that too under compulsion.”

King Bhishmak replied immediately, “We have understood the purpose of your visit, but we do not understand why you have been instigating the people against us.”

Finally, he had said what was on his mind. But I was not one to be defeated. Instantly, I put on an innocent expression and declared guilelessly, “Actually, when I came here, the common people began requesting me to stop this *swayamvar*. Your people think that this *swayamvar* is just a farce and Rukmini is being forced to marry King Shishupala. But, contrary to what you have accused me of, I tried to defuse the situation, explaining to the people that this could not be so. I pointed out to them that so many virtuous and brave princes from Aryavarta had been invited to the *swayamvar*. If any such heinous attempt was made, would they not draw out their swords and stop the ceremony?” I had been asked for an explanation and just see, I had made full use of that opportunity to shoot another arrow that hit right on target. Hearing me,

Jarasandha's and Bhishmak's faces fell and took on a sick hue. But I was not to be satisfied with letting it go at this. I looked around at all the assembled princes and addressing them directly, I asked, "My brave brothers, did I say anything wrong?"

No sooner had I finished speaking than many of the princes vehemently nodded in agreement and stood up with their swords drawn. Not only that, one of them turned up the temperature even more by shouting, "If such an attempt was really made, there will be bloodshed in this court!" My work here was done. The court had transformed into a fighting arena. Seeing these developments, King Bhishmak began to shake like a leaf. He could see that the situation was getting out of hand. Seeing that Bhishmak had lost control and was on the verge of melting into a quivering mass of flesh, Jarasandha swung into action. He tried to handle the situation in a different way. Addressing me directly, he said, "You have not been invited, but despite it, I wonder why you have still come here from Mathura to disrupt the *swayamvar*! And when you were not satisfied even with this, you instigated the common people and are now putting on an innocent face! And as if this was not enough, you are now provoking these princes too, right in front of our eyes!"

Sheer helplessness was clearly evident not only in his words but also in his bearing. I silently said to him, 'O Jarasandha! Whether it is the battlefield or the political arena, you will always find yourself helpless before Krishna. And look at the degree of this helplessness! I will keep mortifying you, and you will be forced to just watch like a spectator!' But Jarasandha was seasoned enough to gauge the situation. He had understood that I was repeatedly embarrassing him so that he would get incensed and the situation would get out of hand. His problem was that he could stand being humiliated, but it was not in his interest to let the situation escalate further. For, the disruption of the *swayamvar* would irrevocably weaken his hold over Aryavarta. Then everyone would gleefully say that if he could not even properly conduct a *swayamvar*, why should they cower before him? Finally, on seeing no way out, the great Jarasandha said, almost entreating me, "What is it that you want? Why are you bent on disrupting this auspicious event?"

Now I had him right where I wanted. I could very well understand his helplessness. And if truth be told, that was precisely what I was using to my advantage. To become the emperor of Aryavarta was his heart's desire. Such being the case, it was imperative that he conducted this *swayamvar* without any disruptions. But I was also well aware of my limits and my current position. Jarasandha was, after all, the uncrowned emperor of Aryavarta. To instigate him beyond a point was risky. Thus, I instantly changed my stance, and although I

still had to say inflammatory things, I had to present them with great humility. So, speaking very calmly, I now said to Jarasandha, “Actually, I wanted to save King Bhishmak’s reputation from being sullied. As you can see, grandfather Kaishik has already left the royal palace because of this issue. Just think, if even the subjects, the people of Kundinpur, and these princes get antagonised, what would be left of the King’s reputation? And if there is bloodshed on his daughter’s wedding, it can affect not just Rukmini’s future, but also that of the entire kingdom. Now, the King can do as he desires. But in my opinion, I would still firmly insist that King Bhishmak should cancel this *swayamvar*.”

Hearing me, the entire court fell silent. Only Shishupala and Rukmi continued to stare at me with angry eyes, as if they would tear me apart right here and now. As for poor Jarasandha, he just did not seem to understand what I had just said and what to make of it. Now, the atmosphere in the court was unprecedented. On one hand, Jarasandha was baffled, while his acolytes were seething with rage. As if this was not enough, the princes I had instigated were standing by, with their swords still drawn, ready to kill, or get killed! Some kings were now trying to help Jarasandha save face. Others were engaged in discussing the future of King Bhishmak and Rukmini. And the best part was that I, who had created this entire ruckus, sat calm and collected in my place. I was enjoying myself immensely. Meanwhile, King Bhishmak was completely distraught on seeing this turbulence in his court. The entire court too was trapped in the web of my arguments. Jarasandha was so tongue-tied that it seemed as if he had taken a vow of silence for the rest of his life! Did I not say from the very beginning that if I was given an opportunity to speak, everything would be brought to naught? Ultimately, what I desired did come to pass. King Bhishmak spoke, almost crying with a sense of hopelessness, “My daughter Rukmini is unconscious since yesterday. The royal physicians are not happy with her condition. Even I am not feeling very well. Please, I request all of you to maintain peace.”

Out of pity for him, everybody calmed down upon his request, but Shishupala could not contain himself. He completely lost his temper. Well, his anger was justified too; after all, with the *swayamvar* now in jeopardy, it was the intended bridegroom who was bound to be rattled the most. However, there was a limit to that too, but this fool had completely lost control. Boiling with anger, he launched a direct and personal attack upon me, saying, “So what if we did not invite Mathura? It was our wish. Why have you shamelessly come here to create hurdles in the *swayamvar*? At any rate, only kings and princes are invited to a royal *swayamvar*, not cowherds!”

That was it. The poor fool had vented all his anger at one go. But

showing my maturity, I maintained a dignified silence. In spite of being called a cowherd in a crowded court, I did not lose my temper. I had to tread the path of Jarasandha and Bhishmak. I did not want to behave childishly. So, I merely turned to Shishupala and spoke very calmly, “Whether I am a cowherd boy or a prince is not for you to decide. It has to be decided by King Bhishmak, and he has done that by being respectful to me. As for my coming here, let me make it clear that this *swayamvar* will definitely have to pay the penalty for humiliating Mathura.”

On hearing this, it was Rukmi’s turn to get angry, and he promptly stood up and shouted, “So, will you abduct Rukmini?”

As soon as he said this, the atmosphere became even more tense. This was exactly what I wanted. Increasing tension in the air would raise the pressure on King Bhishmak. I wanted the situation to deteriorate further so that the King could be made extremely nervous. And this was precisely what happened. When he saw that the arguments now revolved around his darling daughter Rukmini’s abduction, he was completely shattered. Which father would not feel devastated on hearing his daughter’s abduction being discussed? But Bhishmak had completely succumbed to his emotions. He was so overwrought, that he broke into tears right in front of everybody, in his own court. Seeing the King sobbing in this manner, the entire court was stunned into silence. I did not like it either. This was certainly the anguished cry of a loving father. Naturally, as a gesture of sympathy, there was silence in the entire court. Now nobody could muster the courage to say anything. And I was absolutely quiet. What else could I do? After all, I had masterminded the whole thing! Finally, King Bhishmak himself broke the silence. Addressing the assembly in a sad and broken voice, he said, “As I said earlier, my daughter Rukmini has been unconscious since yesterday. The royal physician has advised that it will not be wise to hold her *swayamvar* in her present condition. Thus, with the greatest of regret, I declare the *swayamvar* cancelled. I am deeply distressed by these eventualities and humbly apologise to the invited kings and princes for this.”

Then, turning to me, he said, “I apologise to you too for having committed the grave error of not inviting Mathura for the *swayamvar*.”

Hearing this, I literally leapt with joy. I had got what I desired. My love was safe. The danger of Rukmini getting married had been averted, at least for the time being. A wave of renewed enthusiasm surged through my entire being. And in its wake, I even imparted a piece of advice to the King, “I thank you very much. When you hold the *swayamvar* the next time, please do not forget to invite Mathura.”

I thought that in this way, I could at least make sure that my candidature

was certain for the next time! Meanwhile, a dark and brooding silence had descended upon the royal court after the King announced his decision. Jarasandha, Shishupala and Rukmi appeared thoroughly disgusted. They looked as if they had just lost an epic battle! The worst hit was Shishupala, the honourable bridegroom. All of the poor man's dreams were shattered. And as for poor Jarasandha, with the cancellation of the *swayamvar*, he had to yet again taste defeat at the hands of a mere cowherd boy. Well, if one tried to match wits with Krishna, this was bound to happen!

Oh well, I had my entire life to pamper my ego. Coming back to King Bhishmak, he had regained his composure soon after declaring the cancellation of the *swayamvar*. It was evident from the look on his face, that thanks to this development, his own secret desire had also been fulfilled. Perhaps, that was why the King graciously invited everyone to the feast that had been arranged for the *swayamvar*. This meant that he had become calm enough to fulfill his royal obligations. And the best part was, he did not forget to invite me this time. I was pleased by this rare honour. This was the very first time that I had sat among the Kings of Aryavarta, and now I had even been invited to dine with them. The cowherd boy was indeed going places, but his childishness refused to let go of him. Everything had worked out the way I wanted it to, but I still could not control myself, and while leaving, I made another sarcastic remark. I said to the King, "It is good to know that if not for the *swayamvar*, you at least have the right to decide whom to invite for the feast."

My taunt was so acerbic that it left the trio of Jarasandha, Shishupala and Rukmi fuming. Meanwhile, Bhishmak, who had lowered his eyes in shame, refused to look up. And soon after the announcement, everyone returned to their quarters in a somewhat dejected state of mind. I too wore an unhappy look on my face. However, inwardly, I was dancing with joy. What do I say? The high of having got the *swayamvar* cancelled had gone to my head. I was elated to the core of my being on having succeeded in saving the world of my dreams from devastation. Moreover, I was also likely to catch a glimpse of my beloved Rukmini at the feast. In addition, I was also proud of the fact that I had walked right into Jarasandha's lair and checkmated him yet again. I was truly happy and my heart was singing. But I was such a great actor, that for the world outside, I maintained a solemn expression on my face.

However, once I reached my chambers, I let myself go. I even tried to embrace myself repeatedly! Naughty as I was, Jarasandha's downcast face kept looming in front of my eyes, only increasing my joy. Indeed, there was a strange kind of enmity between Jarasandha and me. He was after my life and I, after his prestige. He kept trying to kill me, and I repeatedly blew his reputation to

smithereens. However, there was no comparison between the two of us. Jarasandha had the biggest kings of Aryavarta paying obeisance to him. And what did I have? Nothing! I had neither a kingdom nor an army. What is also worth noting as well as understanding, is that despite his obvious advantages, it was Jarasandha who had to accept defeat every time. Although I did not have an army, power or influence, I had my self-confidence. I had my firmness of resolve and my supreme ability for deep contemplation. And of course, I also had my exceedingly sharp brain! Over and above that, I also possessed the quality of selflessness and a strong desire to act for the good of all, because of which, even the most difficult of my tasks became easy to perform. And this is not just an empty boast; I had once again proven my capability by getting the *swayamvar* cancelled at the court of a King like Bhishmak, despite the presence of a guardian like Jarasandha. What I mean to say is, I was more than a match for all the royals in Aryavarta, solely because of my political skills and unique qualities.

Well, all that was fine, but that night, there was no question of my falling asleep. On one hand, I was lost in dreams of Rukmini, and on the other, I was feeling puffed up with pride. And smugness also kept rearing its head repeatedly. It was not just for one thing; it had assumed countless forms and surrounded me from everywhere. On one hand, I was smug about having devised a splendid plan and on the other, there was the smugness arising out of the joy I felt at being able to save Rukmini. While I was bursting with delight about being seated among kings, I was already dancing with joy on having been invited to the royal feast. And just when I managed to overcome these feelings, dreams of Rukmini were surging forth to haunt me. What can I say; I passed the entire night tossing and turning!

Well, the night passed somehow, but in the morning, I had a great idea. I wanted to meet grandfather Kaishik before leaving for Mathura. After all, he was the only one who had opposed the *swayamvar* from the very beginning. I thought of giving him the good news and help raise his morale as well. However, I also had other compelling reasons to meet him. For instance, he held great sway over Rukmini and he also hated her brother Rukmi. So, he could prove to be a very useful ally in my quest to attain Rukmini. With so many good reasons, there was no question of postponing this visit. Thus, I went to meet him early in the morning. He was staying in a huge *ashram* on the outskirts of the city. And in terms of comfort, convenience and security, it was no less than a palace. No sooner did grandfather Kaishik receive the news of my arrival than he invited me into his chamber. Perhaps, he had already received the news that I had stopped the *swayamvar*. Anyway, at that moment, I was quite taken in by his personality.

Age seemed to have added to his personal appeal. He appeared to be far more pleased to see me than I was to meet him. This meant that I was right; he already knew about the *swayamvar* being cancelled. It was just as well that he was not unaware of my talents. Let me tell you a secret; on the face of it, this meeting was just a courtesy call but at a deeper level, what I wanted was to give him the opportunity to see his future grandson-in-law! So, it can be said that I had not really come to meet him but to give him the opportunity to meet me! And going by his reaction to my arrival, this meeting was a great success, even from that perspective.

Anyway, by noon, I returned to my quarters after getting grandfather Kaishik's blessings. And the good news was, just like grandfather Kaishik, the people of Kundinpur were also very happy with me. Accolades were being showered on me from all around. I was being given full credit for having saved their beloved princess. And on the other hand, in contrast to all of them, the trio of Jarasandha, Rukmi and Shishupala was on the verge of exploding with fury. So, they too were giving me full credit for foiling their devious plan! And they should! For, I invariably took over the proceedings wherever I was present. The moment I returned to my chambers, smugness had gripped me yet again. But let us leave it aside; why become so smug or talk about Jarasandha at this wonderful moment? Let me talk about Rukmini instead. In other words, let us talk about my heart. Honestly, after this victory, I was pining to make Rukmini my own. Not just that, I was also becoming more and more determined to make her mine. As such, now there were no more obstacles to prevent me from making her mine either. I had proven that I was worthy of her. Moreover, having saved her from Shishupala's clutches, I had become her saviour as well. From this perspective, I did have at least some right over her. All in all, I was so intoxicated by my success that I kept pacing up and down my chamber and became lost in daydreaming.

Oh well, I had my whole life in front of me to dream about having a right over Rukmini and about making her mine. So, as soon as the heady feeling left me, my mind was filled with positive thoughts. It suddenly veered towards thinking about Shaivya and Shwetketu's unflinching contribution to my success. I was filled with gratitude towards them. But my mind changed track once again. It was once again lost in thoughts of Rukmini. Perhaps, I had lost my mind because of this tremendous, unexpected victory! My mind was making me vacillate from one line of thought to another. Suddenly, I began to see even Shaivya and Shwetketu in the context of Rukmini. That was understandable as they were known to me. As things now stood, they were the only ones who could act as a conduit between Rukmini and me. If I wanted to win her hand in

marriage, I would have to use this communication channel very wisely. Thus, my attention latched on to these two while thinking about Rukmini, and my mind got engrossed in making plans for the future, in which these two played a major part. And what were these plans? Only to attain Rukmini! And I had to open up the paths that led towards this objective. Soon, it was evening and I was still lost in these thoughts. A little later, Shaivya and Shwetketu, looking quite happy, arrived to congratulate me. Shaivya was even more delighted. She was happy for me and she was pleased that her friend had been saved from the clutches of a fiend like Shishupala. For some time, we gave ourselves up to congratulating each other over this victory, but soon, I returned to serious topics. I requested them to immediately bring me all the information concerning Rukmini, especially that which was related to her marriage or the *swayamvar*. I also asked them not to inform Rukmini of my love for her. What if all my dreams got shattered at one stroke? It was far better for this cowherd boy to let this dream continue. Then, I made a very strange request to Shaivya. I asked her to keep singing praises of my plan and bravery in front of Rukmini, whenever she got the opportunity. I told Shaivya to repeatedly tell her how I had so heroically saved her from Shishupala and the *swayamvar*, which would have been a hellish experience for her. I did not harbour any evil intention behind telling Shaivya to do all this. My desire was simple; I just wanted to create some attraction for me in her mind with the help of these praises about my bravery and astute planning. I wanted to kindle the fire of love on both sides, instead of keeping it confined only to myself. Now, this passionate lover was entitled to at least make this little effort to tug at the heartstrings of his beloved. Both Shaivya and Shwetketu happily promised to help me in every way they could and took my leave. Actually, I was likely to meet them again on the day of the feast, but at that time, it would certainly not be possible to speak to Shaivya about these things.

When they left, my thoughts veered towards the upcoming feast and with this, I had once again made the arrangement for an all-night vigil! Soon, I was lost in dreams of the feast. I dreamed that I would meet Rukmini. She would serve me with her own hands. How happy she would be to see me seated among all the kings and princes. Then a voice within me warned, 'Hey! Do not lose your senses, Kanhaiya!' The feast was going to be held the next day, but my condition was such that only a person sitting on the bare ground who had formed a liaison with a denizen of skies and who had suddenly found an opportunity to sit as an equal to her can tell you how I spent this night.

Well, this night too came to an end and the next day was once again a decisive one. I had to take full advantage of the opportunity I had received to sit among kings. I just had to make an impression on Rukmini at any cost. I began

dressing up from early in the morning and was still at it till the time of the royal feast. I do not know how many *Pitambars* I must have worn, repeatedly replacing one with the other. I do not remember how many pieces of jewellery I must have worn, only to discard them for others. Still, it was a good thing that I had got ready by the time of the feast. I set off for the palace in regal splendour. Though it was not required, I had still set off with a caravan of ten chariots with me. I was dressed so perfectly that even Yashoda and Radha together could not have attired me more splendidly! After all, this was the day I was going to meet Rukmini, and besides, I also had to overshadow all my rivals, the princes. It is not difficult to imagine how much care I had taken over my attire. And when one dresses up magnificently, it also affects one's overall personality. So, I need not mention that I made a grand entry into the palace. Everyone was being welcomed with *ittar* (natural perfume oil) being applied on them as they were led through a lamp-lit corridor, strewn with flower petals. I was also one among them. This meant that I was being considered as one of the princes. My chest puffed up even more as I strutted into the royal dining hall. The feast had been organised in the huge garden at the back of the palace. It had been decorated on three sides by beautiful, colourful fabrics. There were arrangements for seating about a hundred princes and kings. And no, I was not the first one to arrive. I was obviously not that silly; I cared about my respect. Several of the princes had reached before me. Speaking of the arrangement for the feast, the seating had been arranged in three rows and I had been seated in the last one. Apart from these three rows, there were separate arrangements made for seating another six, very close to the palace. Perhaps, King Bhishmak, Jarasandha, the Chief Minister and others were to be seated there. Meanwhile, kings and princes continued to arrive. However, despite all this, the mood refused to pick up. The dejection at the *swayamvar* being cancelled was visible everywhere. But yes, the dining area was now filled to capacity. The good thing was that nobody had to wait for long. Soon, King Bhishmak arrived, accompanied by Jarasandha, Rukmi and Shishupala. Everybody rose to greet them and after acknowledging their greetings, they also took their seats.

As soon as everybody was seated, the food began to be served. The bowls and platters for the meal had already been placed before the seats. Scores of servants began serving different types of delicacies. The mood was set now, and as you all know, good food was my weakness anyway. But on that day, my mind was not focussed on food. I was anxiously waiting for someone who was a much greater weakness of mine. Indeed, like a true love-struck person, I sat nibbling at my food, my eyes fixed at the main entrance. Rukmini could enter the area through that doorway at any moment. This evening, I wanted to look at

her to my heart's content, for I did not know when I would see her again... or if I would ever see her! Finally, the wait was over. It was about time, or else this lover would have died with his eyes fixed on that cursed doorway! Anyway, why talk of something that has not occurred? The door opened, and there she was! Dressed in shimmering silk in various shades of gold, Rukmini was a sight to behold. Her sparkling radiance almost blinded me even from this distance. It seemed as if the full moon had assumed the form of this ravishing beauty and descended on the earth. I was too mesmerised to take my eyes off her. This love-struck suitor was about to faint when he immediately composed himself. For, if Shishupala or Rukmi got so much as a hint of my love for Rukmini, all my future plans could be in jeopardy. This fear instantly brought me back to my senses. What if my eyes betrayed me and revealed the avalanche of love that was bursting forth from my racing heart? Rather than lose Rukmini forever, it was better that I sacrificed the pleasure of gazing at her in loving admiration. And Kanhaiya never took long to understand anything that was related to his interest. Thus, I sat there quietly, looking very calm and composed. Indeed, this 'normalcy' that I was displaying was just an act. Within me, there was a storm of feelings, raging uncontrollably. On one hand, I was overjoyed that I had been able to save the princess of my dreams from this undesirable fate and on the other, I was thrilled beyond measure by the fact that I was seated in her palace as an honoured guest and that too alongside kings and princes, as their equal. Apart from that, there was the high of seeing Rukmini, which felt like an overriding wave of pure pleasure that filled every pore of my being. My changed circumstances were not allowing my mind to become calm either. As you may remember, when I had first got attracted to Rukmini, there was a great gulf between her status and mine. She was a princess and I, a poor, illiterate cowherd boy. But now I was not only educated, but rich too. And this evening, the power of my personality was no less than that of a king either. Indeed, I was here for a feast on an invitation extended by her own father and was seated among other kings and princes. What better proof could one want than this?

I was in a strange state of mind. The person whose appearance in merely my thoughts was enough to make me restless had come to serve me food today! Naturally, I was thrilled to the core of my being, but I had to bear the torture of sitting quietly, without expressing any of my feelings. All that my heart desired was standing before me, and yet, I sat there in silence as if my eyes were tightly bound and my mouth gagged. Truly, only I could know the state I was in. Coming back to the feast, four servants walked behind Rukmini, carrying trays with all the delicacies that were to be served. Shaivya accompanied Rukmini, holding her hands. My princess appeared somewhat weak but that had not

affected her beauty at all. With downcast eyes, she kept serving the delicious food to the kings and princes. Shishupala however, was so enraged that when Rukmini served him, he angrily pushed away the food. The wounded lover that he was, he was certainly venting out his anger in the wrong place and on the wrong occasion. However, unmindful of this, Rukmini kept fulfilling her duty. She did not have any idea about what delicacies and which guest she was serving. But it was enough that she was doing this much at least. She was in no condition to do much more than this. I was feeling quite relieved on seeing the close bond between Rukmini and Shaivya. Really, their closeness had opened the biggest door towards attaining Rukmini. Incidentally, though I did not look at her directly, I continued to cast furtive, sidelong glances at Rukmini. Suddenly, while serving in the row in front of me, her eyes fell on me. Seeing me, many emotions flitted across her face. She certainly must not have expected me to be present at the feast. And my being seated at par with the kings must have left her completely nonplussed. And as for me, what do I say? I was melting like wax on seeing her! Finally, it was my turn; she reached my table and served me too. However, it did not seem that she gave me any special attention. Well, I did not take any offense to this either. It was fine if she did not give me any special attention. She had at least served me with her own hands. This much was enough to make me lose my senses. Forgetting all about royal etiquette, I devoured all the food, licking my fingers like a true cowherd boy. Indeed, I had never experienced such sweetness in these delicacies before.

Anyway, the feast was over and so were Bhishmak's worries. For that matter, even my task was over. I wanted to return to Mathura quickly. Unnecessarily waiting after your task has been accomplished often brings troubles of its own. And here it was all the more necessary for me to be vigilant. Jarasandha's trio would just be waiting for an opportunity to strike and it was quite capable of creating trouble for me. As soon as this thought came to me, I left for the rest house and got down to prepare for my departure. All I had to do was change my clothes. That done, I instructed the caravan to be ready to leave for Mathura and set off for the palace once again. Yes, after two days of living with kings, I had also become adept at observing royal protocol. So, before departing, I did not forget to meet King Bhishmak and take his leave. However, I was one of a kind, compelled by my habit; I thought, why not meet Jarasandha before leaving and gauge his mood? Now, he had been put up in the chamber right next to the king. And besides, for the sake of the future, and also as a precautionary measure, it was imperative for me to gauge his mood. An important task would be completed, and I would also get the opportunity to fulfill my desire for mischief. So, forgoing all formality, I went straight to his

chambers. Seeing me at his door, Jarasandha was stunned. Actually, I enjoyed shocking people, and this was Jarasandha! He had the right to see all my antics first. Yes, on entering his chamber, I observed all the formalities and greeted him. Of course, there was no question of his acknowledging my greeting. He was seated on the bed and remained ensconced there. He did not even ask me to sit. I found it amazing that the moment he had seen me, he had forgotten his royal etiquette too! But I hardly needed an invitation. Brazenly, I approached a seat opposite him and sat down.

Naturally, I had to begin the conversation; he was obviously not going to speak to me. So why would I delay it? I spoke with great humility, "I had been under your protection these last few days and tomorrow early morning, I plan to set out for Mathura. So, before leaving, I thought that I should meet you and take your leave. I was also wondering if I could get your blessings too."

It was strange! I was so humbly requesting him for his blessings and permission to leave, but he still did not even deem it fit to answer or acknowledge me. Well, what difference would it make to a shameless one like me? I brazenly continued, "As such, I have enjoyed your benevolence since the past many years. Actually, you are the only real guiding force of my life." Saying this, I again took a pause. Jarasandha had heard everything but was still not expressing anything. But yes, he certainly seemed to be simmering within. Of course, I had not said anything that would calm him down! But contrary to my nature, so far, I had neither said anything that would incite him and nor had I made any sarcastic comment. But to tell you the truth, I was meeting my 'guide' alone for the first time. It did not seem appropriate for this meeting to end on such a sour note. Yes, you got it right...! I felt like teasing him. At this moment, he was nothing more than a tiger locked in an iron cage anyway. He was bound by royal etiquette, and even though he would have loved to, he could not harm me in anyway. And since there was no real danger in it, why not take the opportunity to tease him? In an open battlefield, I did not have the courage to face him. In the open ground, he had made me run for my life till I was completely exhausted. So, why would I lose this golden opportunity to take revenge? Thus, just as I was about to leave, I badgered him, "I hope we will meet again in Mathura. But this time, please do come prepared, or you may have to bite the dust..." then after the briefest pause, I added the barb, "...yet again!"

On hearing this, he became wild with rage, but he still did not utter a single word. This was enough to satisfy me. I had managed to tease him and had also understood what I wanted to. I had also conveyed to him all that I wished to, and my inference was clear. Jarasandha did not have any plans to attack me on my journey back home, so the journey was safe. I then took leave from him and

left, as expected, without any response from him. Still, as you all know, it was my nature to be vigilant all the time. Even though it did not seem that Jarasandha intended to attack me, I could not be sure. I had told him that I planned to leave the next morning, only to mislead him. The fact was that I intended to leave Kundinpur that afternoon itself. If Jarasandha had any nefarious plans for me, I wanted to keep him waiting till the next morning while I escaped immediately. Agreed, he could not attack me in Kundinpur, but he could always pounce upon me once I crossed the borders of this kingdom. My life was really strange; I had to keep planning and plotting relentlessly, just to save my life! Sometimes, I wondered if Jarasandha would kill me just by making me run all the time! Well, now that we are on the topic, let me tell you a little more about my wiles. There was also another, deeper reason behind my meeting Jarasandha. By provoking him, I actually wanted to gauge the intensity of his fury and hatred for me. It was pretty evident that these back-to-back failures had wounded his ego. It was also certain that sooner or later, he would launch a final, deadly attack on Mathura. And I was also sure that the attack would be so lethal that it would reduce me as well as the entire Mathura to ashes. Now, these were things that were certain to happen; these puzzles had already been solved. But when would Jarasandha strike? That was the mystery I wanted to solve, and I had finally managed to do that too. After meeting him, I had ascertained that he did not have any such plans, at least in the near future. Indeed, having come to know this was one more achievement of my trip. My life was safe, even if it was just for the time being. I was indeed very happy with this! Coming back to my astuteness, you may have not noted it, but the final statement I had made to him before departing was very effective. While getting up, I had said to him, “This time, please do come fully prepared or you might have to bite the dust yet again.” Did you not get it? I had said it so that he would refrain from attacking in haste. I wanted him to take his time to prepare well so that I could buy some more time. For, what did we have in Mathura? Even a small section of Jarasandha’s army was enough to wipe us out. Regardless, now with yet another victory under my belt, I rode off towards Mathura with my splendid caravan. The only difference was that this was my personal victory. Purely personal!

Notes

[[← 1](#)]

. Srimad Bhagavad Gita, Adhyay – 16, Shloka – 19-20

[[←](#) 2]

. Srimad Bhagavad Gita, Adhyay – 3, Shloka – 19

[← 3]

- . Gopas – Indian name of Sanskrit origin for a male herdsman

[← 4]

. Acharya – An influential mentor

[[←](#) 5]

. Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parv, Adhyay – 32, Shloka – 18-53; Bhagwat Puran, Skandh – 10, Adhyay – 45, Shloka – 12;
Vishnu Puran, Ansh – 5, Adhyay – 21, Shloka – 9

[←6]

. Srimad Bhagavad Gita, Adhyay – 18, Shloka – 56

[[← 7](#)]

. Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parv, Adhyay – 36, Shloka – 13-23; Garg Samhita, Dwarka Khand, Adhyay – 1, Shloka – 41-47;
Vishnu Puran – Ansh 5, Adhyay – 22, Shloka – 8-9.

[[←](#) 8]

. Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parv, Adhyay – 37, Shloka – 9

[[←](#)9]

. Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parv, Adhyay – 33, Shloka – 3; Bhagvat Puran, Skandh – 10, Adhyay – 45, Shloka – 31;
Vishnu Puran, Ansh – 5, Adhyay – 21, Shloka – 18-19

[[← 10](#)]

. Ashram – A spiritual hermitage

[← 11]

. Gurudakshina – It refers to the tradition of repaying one's guru or teacher after a period of study or the completion of formal education.

[← 12]

. Srimad Bhagavad Gita, Adhyay – 11, Shloka – 53-54

[[← 13](#)]

. Srimad Bhagavad Gita, Adhyay – 9, Shloka – 32-33; Adhyay – 10, Shloka – 28, 36

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. Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parv, Adhyay – 33, Shloka – 9-11; Bhagavat Puran, Skandh – 10, Adhyay – 45, Shloka – 36-37;
Garg Samhita, Mathura Khand, Adhyay – 9, Shloka – 15-16; Vishnu Puran, Ansh – 5, Adhyay – 21, Shloka – 23-24

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. Dhoti – loincloth.

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. Srimad Bhagavad Gita, Adhyay – 2, Shloka – 27

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- . Kheer – A South Asian sweet dish made with milk, rice and sugar.

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. Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parv, Adhyay – 39, Shloka – 8; Vishnu Puran, Ansh – 5, Adhyay – 22, Shloka - 17

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. Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parv, Adhyay – 39, Shloka – 20 - 70

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. Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parv, Adhyay – 41, Shloka – 8-30

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