

The Strident March of Destiny

[A critical appreciation of the relevant events
in
Ramayana and Mahabharata]

S. SATYAMURTHI AYYANGAR

(Retd. Officer, Indian Audit Department and
Author of several religious books in English)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<i>Para</i>	<i>Pages</i>
Introduction		i-iii
Preamble	1	1-2
The paramountcy of the Lord's will—neither King Dasaratha nor Kaikeyi accomplished the respective end in view but Lord Rama had things His own way, along His predetermined course	2-6	2-8
The blinding doom, the deafening fate-Ravana rushed to his doom, totally impervious to wholesome advice from various quarters ...	7	9-10
The origin of the Pandava princes and their hundred Cousins—a drastic tale of destiny ...	8-10	11-15
The worst irony of Kunti Devi's life—her first-born, Karna getting pitted against her other sons	11	15-17
Setting fire to the mansion, built of lac and other combustible materials—The Pandavas make good their escape but Duryodhana's agent, Purochana perishes in the fire—evil unto him that evil thinks	12	17-19
The rise and fall of the Pandavas, the victims of the vicious game of dice, the fall of virtue and exaltation of vice	13-17	20-31
The heart-rending hardships of Nala and Damayanti, once again the victims of the vicious game of dice, the hand-maid of destiny	18-20	32-39

	Para	Pages
The lost battle for the cattle could well have been the last but it was not—Ha! the blinding fate!	21-27	40-57
Drona and Destiny	28	57-61
Karna and Arjuna	29	61-66
The gruesome finale—Asvattama goes on a rampage—The good riddance of Mother Earth's unwholesome burden	30	67-69
The inexorable law of destiny, on its chartered course - The melodramatic end to the lives of the heroic souls—The Yadhava race perished under its own weight despite the presence of Krishna, the Supreme architect of destiny, which is but His handmaid, cruising along His chartered course on the ocean of our lives!	31-32	70-72
Errata		

INTRODUCTION

The book on hand pinpoints the hand of destiny in the march of events in our great national epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata and is thus a very useful guide for the study of those immortal classics. Mahabharata, the great war of unique military strategy, was fought more than five thousand years ago on our native soil but confined to the North, the venue being Kurukshetra, now in Haryana State. The war lasted just eighteen days and was fought by day only, except on the last day when it dragged on far into the night. Taking, however, this planet of ours, the Earth as a whole, we find that it has been ravaged in the current century alone by two global wars, known as World War I and World War II, the first lasting from August 1914 to November 1918 and the second lasting over a much longer period, from September 1939 to August 1945, by day as well as night. The Second World War lingered on much longer than the first, throwing as many as sixtyone nations in the fray and thus affecting nearly eighty percent of the World population. Naturally, the scale of devastation was also very much more than that unleashed by the first World War. Fifty million lives were lost and a good number disabled; several cities and villages were razed to the ground, obliterating their erstwhile existence on the globe, along with their natural resources. The savage atrocities and crimes, committed by the Nazi Germany and its axis-partners, Italy and Japan and the counter-offensives, launched by the defending nations, the unleashing of the atom bombs by U.S.A. on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in the last resort, to bring Japan down on its knees, should indeed be nightmarish recollections for those who had witnessed these wars and for the rest who had closely followed the war dispatches, in this regard. The tragedy must be lingering in their memory even after four decades

2. If Ravana and Duryodhana were the uncompromising war-mongers of Ramayana and Mahabharata, we had in Adolf Hitler of Nazi Germany, the most powerful dictator of the time. He was seized with mad lust for dominating the entire world and adopted the peculiar military strategy of launching barbarious surprise attacks (Blitz Krig) on the unwary neighbours, taking mean advantage of the prevailing economic slump and political imbalances elsewhere. Thanks to the Lord Almighty who rescued this good Earth from the brink of a terrible disaster by involving the United States of America also in the last stages of the war. Hitler, who looked like having a good measure of success, a clean sweep as it were, for quite some time, as well as his axis-partners, Mussolini and Tojo eventually met their doom like the classical heroes of Ramayana and Mahabharata, the diabolic ones. Not only that, this planet has most agreeably vindicated its immense capacity for revitalisation and resurgence, as evidenced by the phenomenal recovery of Soviet Russia and Japan from what seemed, at one time, a terrible set-back, much beyond early recovery. Although our Bharata varsha was, providentially, not turned into a battle field, as such during either of the World Wars referred to above, yet, more havoc was wrought by the partition of the Country in the year 1947 than the possible ravages of a regular war; the sundered parts are still not free from tension, bordering, now and then, on war-psychosis. Iran and Iraq, the two neighbouring oil-rich, Islamic Countries in West Asia, just look like ending the war, started between them more than eight years ago.

3. It is a thousand pities, the contemporary world has not taken lessons from past history. It is still in mortal dread of a nuclear holocaust, the total annihilation of the human race at the hands of just a couple of nations, the stock-pilers of the dreadful nuclear weapons of wholesale

destruction, in a matter of minutes who again are in mutual dread of each other. May God, the benign controller of the destiny of His creatures in all the worlds, grant timely wisdom to the peoples of this world to stand up as one man and jolt the Superpowers into reason, thereby averting the human catastrophe beyond words—yes, beyond words, as there will be no one left to tell the terrible tale of extermination of the teeming millions of mankind from the Earth's surface! One can, however, take comfort from the holy thought that He is the Sovereign Master of all the worlds and, therefore, this Earth, which forms part of His sprawling possessions, rather creations, will be taken care of by Him. It is only to be hoped and prayed for that some of His creatures will not, after all, be so fool-hardy as to trample upon human dignity, as a whole, by treating the rest of us as but a vast multitude of flies, mosquitos and such other tiny insects, the fit subjects for mass annihilation in a blazing fire of terrific intensity. The trigger-happy ones will do well to realise and remember, well on time, that they too will be sucked into the vortex of destruction and are not going to be spared in such an eventuality, God forbid!

S. SATYAMURTHI AYYANGAR

The Strident March of Destiny

Expressions like 'Quirk of fate', 'Tryst with destiny' etc, have been in vogue from time immemorial and will be current till the end of time. The well-knit plans of the best among us miscarry; the unpredicted march of events puts scientific determinacy on sore trial; man succumbs meekly to the ravages of the elements, the savage fury of fire, air, water etc taking a merciless toll of things and beings. The events just overtake the individuals, who throw up their hands, in despair exclaiming that the fury of the elements is an act of God and reconciling themselves with the eternal verity of life, 'Man Proposes, God disposes'. Well, if man had things, all his own way, he would be yet another God. The unending chain of lives, bestowed on man by God, giving him repeated opportunities to square up his ethical accounts which have remained hopelessly unbalanced down the ages, puts God also in an unenviable position. As the ruthlessly impartial Arbiter of man's destiny, He has to ordain the individual life in the particular span in a particular manner, conditioned by a particular set of circumstances, depending upon the composition of the load of Karma each one has to eke out. Any attempt on the part of the individual to go against the pre-determined course of events the superior destiny or the hidden hand, as it is otherwise called, in the exercise of his individual volition, is naturally bound to be thwarted. That is how the well-knit plans of even the ingenious misfire and the unexpected happens at the crucial moment. The normal precautions are thrown to the winds and the safeguards in one's possession clean forgotten at the destined moment, an open invitation as it were, for the inevitable onslaught of fate. Puzzles, betrayals, denials and disappointments are but the links in the 'action-reaction chain' underlying the scheme of divine dispensation. The Paramountcy of His will vis-a-vis the rest has been highlighted in the immortal classics of unique excellence, the two great national epics of Bharata varsha, our ancient country, namely, Ramayana and Mahabharata. If, during the Lord's advent on Earth as Rama, He had to live in exile in the formidable forest and

undergo privations of the worst magnitude, it was not as if all these were or could be imposed on Him by any one, however potent and exalted. Rama, the epic hero, did just have things His own way, treading His chosen path setting at naught the mutually divergent plans of king Dasaratha, Queen Kaikeyi and prince Bharata but fulfilling at the same time, His cherished aims, the succour of the 'Sadhus' (devout) and the annihilation of the wicked. Again, during His advent as Krishna, the Pandavas, dearest to Him and their spouse Draupadi, looked upon by Him as His most beloved Sister, had to go into exile for twelve years and spend yet another year, *incognito*, and undergo untold hardships and mortification. This was due to a curious linking up of adverse circumstances into which king Yudhishtira the eldest of the Pandava brothers, reputed to be the very paragon of virtues and staunch supporter of righteousness, got caught up guilefully, due again to the proverbial quirk of fate: Even their intimate bonds with no less than Lord Krishna did not avert the catastrophic trend of events. The Supreme Lord in His incarnate form as Krishna, went on a peace-parley on behalf of the Pandavas to get back the kingdom, legitimately due to them on their return from exile but not restored. But it proved abortive and it was decided to fight out the issue on the battlefield as He had so ordained it. Further, Sri Krishna, victory personified, drove Arjuna's chariot, controlled the military strategy at every turn and yet got the armies on both sides routed securing but a nominal victory for the Pandavas, because the very purpose of His avatar then was to rid Mother Earth of her unholy Burden, the wicked and the vicious. The five Pandavas were the sole survivors on the victor's side while the lives of just three in the other camp were spared. This was in dire contrast to Rama's battle with the Lankan Rakshasas in which there was not a single casualty on Rama's side in terms of the dead, the injured and the prisoners of war. And now, let us have a close look, in the succeeding paragraphs, at the Scenario in each case.

(2) The three principal queens of king Dasaratha were Kausalya, Sumitra and Kaikeyi in the order of their seniority. When king Dasaratha sought the hand of Kaikeyi, the daughter of the king of Kekaya there was a distinct understanding between the two kings that the son, born of Kaikeyi would succeed Dasaratha's

throne. This was a matter well within the knowledge of Kaikeyi and her hunch-back lady-in-waiting also. But the unwritten agreement became otiose as it was not invoked at any time thereafter. Instead, two boons, granted by Dasaratha to Kaikeyi much later, were invoked by her and that too, not there and then, but thousands of years later, when their relevance in the form in which they were put forth by her was open to question. The entire episode can bear critical scrutiny even at this distance of time, the time-lag hardly vitiating the rationale behind the boons in question. To begin with the very beginning, Kaikeyi, even as a girl of seven, came under the spell of a curse from a religious mendicant, the silent operation of a long-ranging fate and got her left hand turned into one of iron, stiff and strong, with its anatomy altered altogether. In her girlish innocence the little one gave alms with her left hand to the venerable beggar and lo! the curse in question was laid on her. This transformation, coupled with her great skill in chariot-driving, developed in later years, enabled her to evoke the grateful appreciation of King Dasaratha at a critical juncture, many, many years after. It was a battle in the upper regions where even the invincible Dasaratha fared ill and had to be retreated to a place of safety, his charioteer being none other than Kaikeyi herself. The left axle gave way *en route*, but Kaikeyi could employ her left hand in its place and drive the horse with the reins in her right hand, out of harm's way. The curse inflicted on her, as a mere girl of seven, turned out to be a blessing in disguise. She also tended the king so well that he recovered soon and sized up the situation. Although his own wife had done duty as his charioteer, the king could not conceal his grateful admiration of her life-saving skill and he granted her two boons. The dutiful wife that she was, she did not expect anything in return for the service rendered by her and thus the unnamed, non-descript boons in question were gradually consigned to the limbo of oblivion and clean forgotten by her till that fateful night, several thousand years later, when the hunch-backed Mantara, the evil genius, reminded the Queen about the king's good gesture in the distant past.

(3) It was towards the fag end of king Dasaratha's reign of sixty thousand years over the Kosala kingdom that the four divine babes of ultra-mundane origin were ushered in and they radiated

cheer in the royal household after years of barrenness. The odd numbers, one and three, Rama and Lakshmana got paired inseparably just as the even numbers, two and four. Bharata and Satrugna got entwined, as it were. And yet, all the brothers loved each other immensely. When sage Viswamitra presented himself before king Dasaratha and sought the help of Rama, then a mere lad of twelve for ensuring the safe conduct of the ensuing yaga, the sage was to undertake in a distant forest, infested with Rakshasas, and the king had to agree, reluctantly though, the inseparable Lakshmana also accompanied Rama. After the successful conclusion of the yaga, the royal lads were taken by the sage to Mithila before returning to Ayodhya. The mighty bow of Lord Siva in Janaka's court which many a prince, assembled there, could not just lift, much less handle, was lifted by Rama, the mighty archer, with great ease and broken into two pieces. Rama thereby secured the coveted hand of Sita, of divine origin, lovingly adopted by king Janaka while in the bargain three other princesses the daughters of king Janaka and his brother were given in marriage to Bharata, Lakshmana and Satrugna. The royal princes, their consorts, parents and the royal entourage returned to Ayodhya but, in a matter of days, Bharata and his inseparable companion, Satrugna went to Kekaya escorted by Bharata's uncle, the prince of Kekaya, who attended the royal weddings in Mithila. Twelve long years rolled by thereafter and still Bharata and Satrugna were neither called back from Kekaya nor did they come back on their own. Of the three principal queens, Kausalya enjoyed the company of Rama and his inseparable brother Lakshmana, all right and lavished her affections on them. But insofar as the other two queens were concerned, Sumitra, the highly evolved soul that she was, had no grievance whatsoever that her two sons were not fondled by her, the one always in the company of his elder brother Rama in the latter's palace and the other in distant Kekaya for over twelve years on the heels of his marriage. Kaikeyi's only son was also far away and for so long. And yet, she was not in the least worried or mindful of his absence and never for once expressed her wish to get him back home. Incredible and yet how true! This was because Rama was the sole centre of ultra-mundane joy and the cynosure of all eyes, attracting the individual attention of one and all, from the king downwards to the last subject in the land. So far as queen Kaikeyi was concerned, it could be asserted that she loved Rama most, more than Kausalya herself.

(4) When Rama was twentyfive years old, it suddenly occurred to king Dasaratha, who had sat on the throne for as many as sixty thousand years, that Rama should be installed as the yuvaraja (junior king), the thin end of the wedge, preparatory to the king's final retirement, in a short while. His Subjects to whom he formally disclosed his intention at a Conclave, specially convened for the purpose, acclaimed it with spontaneous joy, not because they were by-any-means dissatisfied or fed up with the king's long reign but because they perceived in Rama the embodiment of all conceivable auspicious traits, endearing him to one and all. This was also in conformity with the established tradition of the Ikshvahu dynasty. Preparations for this great event were made with great expedition. Things were well under way and the coronation was to take place, early next morning. Of his three principal queens, it was an open secret that the king loved Kaikeyi most and she, in turn, loved Rama most. It was, therefore, but appropriate that the king went to Kaikeyi's palace that night instead of retiring to his own palace or queen Kausalya's apartments, not to dally with his beloved queen as is commonly believed but to spend the whole night in Kaikeyi's company in joyful contemplation of the ensuing coronation, discussing even minute details of the proceedings with her. But what happened? What a rude shock and how jolting! The king saw his sweetheart not where she would usually receive him lovingly but in a chamber deep down and even so, not his darling but fate, in its cruellest form come face to face to tease and torment him the devil revelling in death-dance. Badly, but effectively tutored by that hunchback, the crooked Mantara, Kaikeyi turned deadly against the elder queen Kausalya, nay, against Rama himself seized with a mad lust for power. The satan took complete possession of the queen and she, therefore, made up her devilish mind to demand without any further qualm or compunction that her son, Bharata shall be installed on the throne instead of Rama and that the latter shall be asked to leave the city immediately and spend as many as fourteen years in the forest, as an exile, under austere conditions. To this end, she now claimed from the king the two boons granted to her long ago. The hapless old King, swept off his feet by the tragic suddenness of such a turn of events, submitted to her hard-hearted desires with a mortal pang and sank on the bed insensate. O what a fall from the seventh heaven of delight to the bottom-most depth of dejection! Well, this is the written part of the story, in a nutshell.

(5) And now, the unwritten part : Now is a great event, a festive occasion of remarkable dimensions and yet, two of the four sons are away ! Seeing that no attempts have been made to get them back to attend the coronation and share in the rejoicings, could it be construed that they were just ignored or clean forgotten? Were the two brothers, who were absent from the scene, inimical to Rama and to Lakshmana as well because of his intimacy with Rama ? No, not at all. Bharata adored Rama and Rama's love for Bharata was simply overwhelming, as gathered from the Adikavya of Valmiki Bhagavan in several contexts ; Satrugna also loved Rama intensely but indirectly, as one adored by Bharata. There could not obviously have been any function, big or small, without the full complement of the princes. And yet, king Dasaratha took no steps to get Bharata and Satrugna back home, well on time, for participation in the momentuous event. His commitment at the time of his taking on Kaikeyi as his bride must have been weighing on the king's mind with gnawing uneasiness and he must have succumbed to the stronger of the two pulls, namely, his overwhelming attachment to Rama, apart from the king's innate respect and preference to the traditional norm of primogeniture. It must have, therefore suited the king to rush through the function in the absence of Bharata and the omission to get him back home was obviously deliberate. If even Rama the very personification of truth and righteousness, was a willing partner to by-passing Bharata's claim to the throne, he had valid reasons for that, as one could perceive from the onward march of events. First of all, implicit obedience to the father, whatever be the merits of his dispensation, took precedence over everything else ; Secondly Rama an avatar of Lord Vishnu, come down on earth for a specific mission, had the infinite capacity to manipulate the events in such a way that His mission always gained the upper hand and went on unimpeded whatever be the earthly obstacles threatening it ; thirdly, Rama's meek submission to Dasaratha's wish to instal the former on the throne was not only by way of playing the ideal son, never going against the wish of the father, but also to reveal to the contemporary world and

posterity the greatness and grandeur of Bharata, as subsequent events did. As a matter of fact, he who knows not Bharata knows not Rama and misses the best part of Ramayana. In fact, Rama's coronation would have gone on smoothly if only Bharata and ofcourse, his inseparable brother Satrugna had been present in the city. Kaikeyi would simply not dare to make any of the two proposals to the king. Bharata would have nipped them in the bud. With Bharata in the town, Rama's leaving for the forest would be a sheer impossibility. Bharata would certainly not be a party to depriving Rama of the kingdom, as revealed by the subsequent events. In fact, Bharata considered himself as but a vassal of Rama, the liege lord having the right of ownership in much the same way as the kingdom righteously vested in him. How then can one property of Rama rule over another? Further, even if Kaikeyi claimed the two boons, granted to her by the king, several thousands of years ago, the boons had no concrete form and content, as such. No doubt, Kaikeyi could spell out at any time what she wanted in terms of those two boons but whatever it is her demands could not obviously clash with the earlier commitment made by the king, made public only a short while ago in terms of which preparations for Rama's coronation were already in full swing. As a measure of compromise Bharata could have half the kingdom and even then, the eventuality of the dutiful Bharata not accepting it has to be kept in view. In any case, there was no question of Rama being sent in exile to the forest. On the other hand, Kaikeyi could have jolly well invoked the pre-condition of her marriage and repudiated the proceedings, currently going on to instal Rama on the throne. Even then the matter could have been amicably settled, one part of the kingdom going to Rama and the other to Bharata. Further, king Dasaratha could have easily wriggled out of the predicament by saying that Rama's coronation was settled by public suffrage and undoing it would have to be referred back to the subjects or at least his council of ministers, a flagrant omission which the king realised much later, after he had given his word to Kaikeyi. But why did things happen the way they did? The simple and straight

answer would be: they just had to happen. This only underscores the primacy of the Lord's will, the eventuality, known familiarly as Divine dispensation.

(6) Kaikeyi was indeed the gem of a lady who would not descend to the level of a mere hireling of a charioteer and grab at the two boons, granted by the king, swayed by an impulse of sheer gratitude. Evidently, she did not take them seriously and therefore it was, they were clean forgotten by the queen who had no need to invoke them either. In any case, employment by her of the boons to the detriment of Rama was altogether out of the question as it was common knowledge that it was she who loved Rama most and it was this outstanding trait of Kaikeyi that led king Dasaratha to her palace on that fateful night. As a matter of fact she did not at all miss her son Bharata even though he had been out of station for more than twelve years at a stretch. Why should such a fine lady be got suddenly worked up to such a feverish pitch completely alienated from Rama, of all persons thus playing the diametrically opposite role? But what really happened? Mysterious indeed are the ways of the Lord! Neither the plan of the king and his subjects nor that of Kaikeyi succeeded but the Lord in His incarnate form as Lord Rama, had His own plans to unfold, as brought out by the great epic of Ramayana. Where was the need for the supreme Lord to come down to Earth if it was only a matter of occupying the throne of Ayodhya and resting on His oars? The Lord fulfils himself in many ways and against this cardinal background, one could discern in Kaikeyi's paradoxical behaviour nothing more than a temporary mental aberration, induced in her by an overriding providence the inscrutable hand of *destiny, in its strident march*. As a matter of fact on Bharata's arrival in Ayodhya, soon after the king passed away due to the pangs of separation from Rama, Kaikeyi was literally jolted back to reason by the irate Bharata and she became her former self. It deserves to be noted that she was right in the vanguard of the huge retinue of Bharata heading towards the forest to fetch Rama back to Ayodhya. Rama's devotion to her also remained as high as ever, not in the least affected by the interim course of events.

(7) Reverting to the *yaga* (sacrifice) performed by Sage Visvamitra, referred to earlier, over which Rama and Lakshmana kept night-long vigils, the formidable demoness Thataka and her two Sons, Subahu and Maricha flew over the venue of the Yaga and attempted to defile the sacred precincts in many ways. While Rama's death-dealing arrows slew Thataka and Subahu why was Maricha's life alone spared by sending him rolling down the deep sea, stunned and stupefied? It was because Rama intended to make use of Maricha for the fulfilment of His mission on Earth, as the student of the later chapters of Ramayana could very well see. The Maricha, left behind and seen again in Rama's arena in Aranya Kanda (Book three) was indeed very different from what we had seen of him in Bala Kanda (Book one). After tasting the venom of Rama's arrow Maricha grew truly penitent and lived in mortal dread of Rama. He was a thoroughly transformed being, we may even say, regenerated, it being a fresh lease of life, graciously bestowed on him by Rama. Therefore it was, Maricha tendered wholesome advice to Ravana, who approached him with the cowardly blue-print, commissioning him to play the role of the fake-deer, alluring Sita and eluding Rama over a considerable distance and, when eventually slain by Rama's unerring arrow, feigning the voice of Rama in crying out "Ha Sita! ha Lakshmana!" The blue-print, if put through with implicit obedience on the part of Maricha, would pull out Lakshmana also from the cottage, leaving Sita, all alone, at the mercy of the imposter, Ravana, disguised as a hermit, facilitating her abduction. Maricha warned Ravana, in the first instance, not to take liberties with Rama, of unlimited prowess and take lessons from the deadly blow, dealt by His bow on no less than Thataka and Subahu, Maricha's mother and brother respectively. Ravana took Maricha's advice aright and went away. But, the devil, rushing to his doom, approached Maricha, a second time, some time later after his sister, Surpanaka gave him her first-hand account of Sita's enthralling beauty. With his mind rivetted, as it were, on Sita, Ravan revived the self-same blue-print, demanding implicit compliance by Maricha, on the point of the bayonet. A reluctant but determined Maricha, determined not only to die at the hands of Rama instead of Ravana but also to bring about, in the process, the downfall of Ravana and his Rakshasa hordes,

in toto, jumped into the fray and did all what Ravana had asked him to do. The dying Maricha's feigning the voice of Rama, as in the said blue-print, was indeed a piece of very valuable service rendered by Maricha to Rama and not to Ravana. Earlier on, Rama had pledged succour to the Rishis of Dandakaranya, tormented and tortured by the Rakshasas who stalked the forest. But then, there was no direct enmity between Rama and the Rakshasas and by annihilating the later, Rama would render himself guilty of unprovoked aggression. Had not Maricha cried out in the manner he did, Lakshmana's vigil over the cottage would have gone on uninterruptedly and Sita's abduction by Ravana would not have materialised. Ravana would then be as safe as ever. Rama's pledge to the Rishis of Dandakaranya would remain an idle boast, not to mention Rama's prior pledge to the Devas, in the upper regions, to annihilate Ravana, the terrible scourge, the terrific terror of terrors to the Devas and the devout everywhere. Surely, the regenerated Maricha cannot be classed with that arch-felon, Ravana. Even Ravana, of superlative eminence all round, would not have met his doom through his promiscuous love for Sita, the Divine Mother but for the grinding wheel of destiny crushing him down. Ravana had acquired amazing mastery over his senses which enabled him to perform the severest of all penances. But the senses, ultimately, wreaked vengeance on him by gaining the upper hand insofar as his mad love for Sita took the turn of a fatal blunder, impervious, till the very end, to the sane counsel of Sita herself, Hanuman, Angada, Kumbakarna, Vibhishna, Malyavan and finally the all-merciful Rama Himself, who was indeed keen on crushing the evil from the evil-doer and not the evil-doer, as such. Rama wished to bend and not break but Ravana would not bend and rushed to his doom. Here then is the unmistakable hand of destiny, which damned the redoubted Ravana, of unquestionable greatness and grandeur, beyond redemption. Again, even one of average prudence would have taken lessons from the havoc wrought by just one monkey, Hanuman and averted the impending disaster of facing the formidable Rama and his battalions of monkey hordes. But Ravana did not and, therefore, failed to restore Sita to Rama, well on time. Why? He was just rushing to his doom! Let us now

pass on to the other great epic, Mahabharata and take note of the havoc played by destiny on the stalwart heroes.

(8) To begin with the very beginning, the origin of the Pandava princes and their hundred cousins was itself a drastic tale of destiny. Well, even the birth of their respective fathers, king Pandu and his elder brother, Dhritarashtra, came off under mysterious circumstances, in an abnormal setting underscoring the upper hand of destiny, in its unrelenting onward march. King Santanu, of the Bharata dynasty, had wived no less than goddess Ganga, in human form, and got through her the illustrious son, Devavrata, better known as Bhishma in later days. Seven earlier progenies of Santanu and Ganga were consigned by the latter, the moment they were born, to the swirling waters of river Ganga and poor Santanu was a helpless on-looker, having bound himself not to question his wife's actions, as a pre-condition of their marriage. The eighth alone, in the form of Devavrata, was spared by the mother at the special request of the father but it resulted in the mother departing from the scene immediately, in accordance with the pre-condition set by her for their marriage. Some years later, Santanu fell madly in love with the enchanting Satyawati, daughter of a fisherman and wanted to marry her. But Satyawati's father insisted that the son, born of her, should be made the heir-apparent to the throne, a condition to which king Santanu could not however, conscientiously agree in view of his fundamental obligation to Devavrata. The love-lorn king was thus languishing but his dutiful son, Devavrata, diagnosed his father's malady all right and set out to remedy it. Approaching Satyawati's father, Devavrata pleaded with him, on behalf of the king, but the adamant fisherman would not budge from his earlier stand. Thereupon, Devavrata solemnly declared, in the presence of the large gathering around, that he abjured his claim to the throne and further swore that he would remain a bachelor, all his life, so as to ward off the possible apprehension that his sons might, in due course, depose Satyawati's son from the throne. Devavrata was thenceforward known as Bhishma, the terrible, the appellation given to him by the people around, in view of the terrible vow of enormous dimen-

sions taken by him, as the great epic of Mahabharata reveals, step by step. Queen Satyavati gave birth to two sons. Chitrangada, the elder prince, ascended the throne of Hastinapura after king Santanu passed away but died in a battle soon thereafter, leaving no children. Vichitravirya, the younger prince, still a minor, was duly crowned king and brought up under the grooming care of the dutiful and dedicated Devavrata (Bhishma). Bhishma got the prince married, when he came of age, to the two daughters of the king of Kasi, Ambika and Ambalika. Unfortunately, Vichitravirya also met with premature death due to overindulgence, leaving no children. Thus Satyavati's marital contract, in terms of her progeny perpetuating the royal lineage, was reduced to a sheer mockery due to the interplay of the intriguing forces of fate, the irony of human hopes and aspirations. Satyavati, the erstwhile proud and ambitious queen, was now relegated to the unenviable plight of a forlorn widow, frustrated and enfeebled. O, what a turn of events, the crooked course of cruel fate! It was Satyavati's father who had literally extracted from prince Devavrata, the legitimate heir-apparent to the throne, a vow of life-long celibacy and now that very Satyavathi entreats Bhishma to break the vow and get married for the sake of perpetuating the royal dynasty. Laudable though, the redoubted Bhishma stood firm as a rock and would not break his vow, whatever be the cost.

(9) As a last resort, Satyavati mentally invoked the help of sage Vedavyasa, the great codifier of the vedas and mobile encyclopaedia of vedic lore, to find a way out of the impasse. As a matter of fact, Vedavyasa was none other than Satyavati's own son, born to the illustrious sage Parasara, when she was still a virgin. Here again, one can readily perceive the hand of destiny that manifested itself, well in advance, paving the way for the coming events. Satyavati had, no doubt, a comely figure, very much out of the ordinary run but there was also the prohibitive fishy smell emanating from her body, going miles around, repelling and keeping the elite at a respectable distance. Sage Parasara not only blessed her with a son of far-reaching fame but also deodorised her and imparted to her fragrance, *par excellence*. Her perfume permeated

the air around, far and wide. No wonder, this rare combination of form and fragrance in young Satyawati turned king Santanu crazy to the extent of seeking her hand and elevating her as his queen, notwithstanding her humble origin. Satyawati asked Vyasa to procreate progeny through princess Ambika, who was, in turn directed to receive the sage in her bedroom. Ambika, however closed her eyes as soon as the bearded sage entered the chamber. Vyasa informed Satyawati that Ambika would beget a son strong and sturdy but blind. This was disquieting news and Satyawati, therefore, instructed princess Ambalika to receive the sage in her chamber, the next night, without closing her eyes as Ambika had done. She did, as instructed but turned pale when she saw the sage entering her room. Next morning, Vyasa informed his mother that Ambalika would also beget a son, hale and hearty but pale-looking. This led Satyawati, who was keen on getting a perfect progeny through Vyasa, to commission Ambika once more to receive the sage, not only without any mental reservation but also with due regard and adoration. Ambika, however, sent her maid instead, duly attired in royal robes. The meticulous maid received the sage with affection and admiration and was, therefore, blessed with a son of rare excellence, with a great degree of mental and physical perfection. Thus by a quirk of fate, once again, Dhritarashtra was born blind to Ambika, Pandu was born pale-looking to Ambalika and Vidura to the palace maid, Ambika's proxy. The last one was but an incarnation of god Yama, born on Earth due to the curse laid on him by the famous Mandavya Rishi of yore, and was, therefore, a person of great wisdom, calm and unruffled.

(10) Bhishma, the shrewd doyen of state-craft, brought about the marriage alliance of Dhritarashtra and Gandhari, by which the Kuru Kingdom and its neighbouring north-west Kingdom of Gandhara were drawn closer. Likewise the grand old man got Pandu married to Kunti, the princess from the Kingdom by that name and Madri, the princess from Madra Kingdom. No doubt Pandu, pale-looking but, all the same, hale and hearty, ruled over the Kingdom well and expanded it through conquest and

consolidation. He also developed great attachment towards his two charming wives. But then fate decreed that he shall not enjoy conjugal pleasures with them, a - tense and tantalising predicament. Once when Pandu went a - hunting, a Sage was mating with his spouse, in the guise of a deer. The male deer was hit by an arrow from Pandu's bow and the dying Sage cursed Pandu that he shall meet with instantaneous death if he mated with his wives, the penalty for his having shot at a mating couple. Disgusted with his lot, the childless Pandu retreated to the forest along with his two queens, entrusting the governance of his Kingdom to Bhishma and Vidura, a virtual abdication! This led to the installation of Dhritarashtra on the throne, in the particular context. The cruel conspiracy of circumstances compelled Pandu to suppress his legitimate desires and lead an ascetic life. The urge for children, however, got the better of him and he confessed to his wives his guilt in denying them the basic pleasures of womanhood. Thereupon Kunti disclosed to Pandu about the boon, granted to her by Sage Durvasa, whereby she could invoke any Deva (celestial) of her choice by pronouncing the relative divine spell for blessing her with a Son. Even so, she discreetly withheld from Pandu her secret rapport, in terms of the said spell, with Sun-God, during her virginity and the instantaneous birth of a Son, named Karna, a miniature Sun, in human form, whom she had to perforce abandon, there and then, to avoid public reproach. The little one, impounded in a box and entrusted to the merciful care of the surging waters of river Ganga, was picked up by a charioteer of Hastinapura and, in course of time, got pitted against his own blood-brothers, the Pandavas (Sons, born to Kunti and Madri, the wives of Pandu). What a curious concatenation of events, repelling and reversing the natural course of events! This is the second instance of birth outside wedlock, met with in this epic, the earlier one being that of Vyasa, born to Sage Parasara through Satyawati, then a virgin lady. Pandu, disabled conjugally, insisted that Kunti should incant the divine spell and invoke the blessing of the Deva, of her choice, to beget a child. Accordingly, Kunti

invoked Yama, the god of righteousness (dharma), also known as Dharmaraja and Yudhishtira, also known as Dharmaputra, was born. Overjoyed at the birth of such a brilliant Son, Pandu encouraged Kunti, off and on, to try, again and again, and beget further progeny. Kunti produced, successively, Bhima and Arjuna, invoking the rapport of Vayu (Wind-god) and Indra, the Ruler of the Devas in the upper world, respectively. When goaded by Pandu to beget more children, in this way, Kunti judiciously passed on the mantle to Madri by initiating her into the secret mantra, imparted to her (Kunti) by Sage Durvasa. This was, of course, done with the knowledge and blessing of Pandu. Madri invoked the twin gods, the Asvini Devatas, of exquisite charm and gave birth to the charming princes, Nakula and Sahadeva. Here then was the systematic pre-planning by a superior destiny to deflect the course of events, nullifying, in a sense, the effect of the curse laid on Kunti's future husband and producing the heroes of Mahabharata. In Hastinapura, Gandhari, wife of Dhritarashtra, was also in the family way but the period of her gestation got extended inordinately, far beyond the normal limits. However, when the news of the birth of Yudhishtira to Kunti reached Hastinapura, Gandhari grew impatient and resorted to a crude process of enforced delivery whereby the embryo got fragmented and she gave birth to hundred Sons, Duryodhana, Dussasana etc and a daughter, Dussala, in place of what might have emerged as a single progeny in the normal course. The stage is set, right from here, for the Mahabharata, the great war that is to come off years later but the hand of destiny shows up only in course of time.

(11) After the death of Pandu in the forest and the self-immolation of Madri along with him, the Pandava brothers went back to Hastinapura along with Kunti Devi and lived in the palace under the benevolent banner of the grand old Bhishma pitamaha and the royal patronage of king Dhritarashtra, the paternal uncle of the Pandavas. Dhritarashtra's eldest Son, Duryodhana, however, looked upon them all as intruders and did not take to them kindly, right from the beginning, giving

the reader a glimpse of the mini-sparks of fire which gradually assumed the menacing dimensions of the eventual holocaust. Yudhishtira, the eldest of the Pandava brothers, slightly older than Duryodhana, noted for his scrupulous conduct, righteous and upright, gentle and sweet disposition, gained overwhelming popularity and respect. While this kindled jealousy in Duryodhana, of evil temperament, the overbearing attitude of Bhima, of exceptional might, created many a problem, now and then, much to the discomfort of his Kaurava cousins, literally adding fuel to the fire. On the whole, the superior strength and superlative skill of the Pandava brothers, and, above all, their monolithic solidarity kindled the fire of jealousy and rancour in the cankerous minds of Duryodhana and company, all along. All the princes, the Pandavas and their cousins learnt archery under Dronacharya, the illustrious preceptor of extraordinary prowess and acquired commendable skill in the art. Even Duryodhana and Bhima learnt archery under that great preceptor and acquired remarkable proficiency notwithstanding their distinct predilection for wielding the mace. Even so, Arjuna stole a clean march over all the rest, excelling all the others in archery by dint of severe discipline and remarkable dedication, sending forth arrows, with both hands, with perfect ease and hitting the target, even blindfolded. What really fanned the embers of jealousy, smouldering in the rankling heart of Duryodhana, was the open acclamation of Arjuna by Drona, on certain occasions, as the hero of archery, with no equal in all the three worlds. Ironically, Karna, referred to in the previous paragraph, palmed off as the son of a mere charioteer of Hastinapura by virtue of his upbringing, had stealthily learnt the art of archery from no less than the redoubted Parasurama, the preceptor of Bhishma and Drona, disguised as a brahmin. He sprang a surprise on all by suddenly appearing on the scene on one occasion and challenging effectively Arjuna's supremacy in archery. It suited Duryodhana extremely well to (1) befriend Karna, the new find, the competent combatant, the former was looking for, to deal with Arjuna, and (2) rub shoulders with him (Karna) after conferring on him princedom, as the ruler of Angadesa. There and then, Karna

naturally cast his lot wholeheartedly with Duryodhana, the architect of the former's sudden elevation to royalty. But Kunti was then the saddest lady on earth, stung by the worst irony of her life, namely, her own son, the first born, getting pitted against her other sons. It only aggravated her poignancy when she felt obliged to keep to herself the secret of Karna's origin, corroding her heart, all the time.

(12) Despite his public demonstration of love for his brother's sons, the Pandavas, Dhritarashtra, the blind king, caught in the horns of dilemma, allowed his love for his own sons to gain the upper hand, every time, to the detriment of the Pandavas. This naturally influenced the deleterious deflection of the course of events, as unfolded in this epic, showing up the unmistakable hand of destiny. Duryodhana, the eldest son of the king, aided and abetted by his brother Duhsasana, their uncle Sakuni, the evil genius and Karna, bound inalienably by the bonds of friendship, rooted in gratitude (the gang of four), had the last say in any matter. They misled the blind king who did not also mind being misled and, therefore, gave in after putting up initially a semblance of resistance. No doubt, the king held Vidura, his half-brother, of immense wisdom, in high esteem. The king never failed to consult Vidura, but the final decision of the king, in each case, was swayed by his innate weakness, his parental fondness for a son whom he knew fully well to be an evil-monger who would not let the Pandavas live in peace. The first thing, the king did, at the behest of Duryodhana, was to send the Pandavas to a place, called Varanavata, ostensibly as a matter of political expediency to please the people over there but really to keep them away from his sons and build up the popularity of the latter, among his subjects. Kanika, Sakuni's minister and an astute politician, also did a good bit of brain-washing and impressed upon the fickle-minded king Dhritarashtra that it would be suicidal for his sons if mercy was shown by him to the powerful Pandavas, who could any day easily eclipse, literally destroy his sons. Kanika also revealed to the king the secret device, the gang of four had up their sleeves to liquidate the Pandavas physically, during their stay in Varanavata. The king did not seem to dislike the idea and,

therefore, gave his assent to the nefarious design on the Pandavas. Bhishma, Drona, Kripa and others, who very much wished that the Pandavas and Kauravas should live in amity and endeavoured for peace and harmony among them, were kept in the dark about the sinister designs of the gang of four and the king's secret assent thereto. Actually, they even thought that Varanavata might be a safer place than Hastinapura for the Pandavas. However, Vidura got scent of it and duly warned Yudhishtira about the conspiracy, hatched by Duryodhana and even disclosed the details of the plot, the death-trap. To be forewarned is forearmed and so, the Pandava brothers decided to be extremely vigilant. At Varanavata the Citizens gave the princes a rousing reception but only a temporary make-shift accommodation was provided to them till the palace under construction, got ready for their occupation. Purochana, the minister, specially sent by Duryodhana to supervise the construction of the palace, pretended to be very sincere and assured Yudhishtira that the palace would be ready for occupation soon and that he (Purochana) was there to give the finishing touches. Alas! he was outwitted by Yudhishtira through a show of exceptional cordiality and little did Purochana, the devil in disguise, know that he, the Supervisor, was being secretly supervised by Yudhishtira, who, however, feigned absolute ignorance of the plot. As soon as the palace, built not of brick and mortar but of lac and other combustible materials, was ready, the Pandavas occupied it, apparently with great jubilation, keeping Purochana, Duryodhana's agent on the spot, off the track. An expert miner, sent at the instance of Vidura, constructed secretly an underground tunnel with the help of the Pandavas, working during nights. Purochana did not have the slightest inkling of this counter-move of the Pandavas. In terms of the blue print of the conspiracy, Purochana was to wait for a whole year and then set fire to the palace during midnight, giving the princes no chance to escape and, at the same time, making it appear that the fire was purely accidental. Evil unto him that evil does (thinks). Forestalling Purochana, on a dark midnight the Pandava brothers made good their escape, through the tunnel, into the neighbouring forest, along pre-planned routes. But just before that, Bhima set fire to the palace as well as the quarters, occupied by Purochana near the

palace gate. *Rooi Purochana* perished in the flames, becoming a victim of his own plot. The Pandavas were also believed to have perished in the flames. When the news reached Hastinapura, Dhritarashtra entertained secret joy at the successful accomplishment of the plot but pretended to lament, the loudest of all. State mourning was announced and the funeral rites were also put through. Bhishma, the grand old man, was the saddest of all, terribly upset by the premature death of the promising princes. But Vidura assuaged him by telling him confidently that he (Vidura) had authentic information about the Pandavas' escape into a territory outside the Kuru Kingdom with the assistance, specially provided by him through his forevision of the coming events. Brave and undaunted by the onslaught of adversity, in quick succession, the Pandavas, followed by their mother Kunti Devi, encountered not only difficult terrain, *en route*, but also a mighty Rakshasa, named Hidimba. The gigantic cannibal was, however, no match for Bhima, of exceptional strength. It was, no doubt, a tough encounter and Hidimbi, the sister of Hidimba, who stood staring at Bhima's amazing strength, fell in love with him. On the advice of Kunti Devi, Bhima requited Hidimbi's inordinate love for him by marrying her. Here again, the hand of fate is discernible because Gatotkacha, the son born to Bhima through Hidimbi, of uncanny strength, with a large retinue of Rakshsas, was a great pillar of strength on the side of Pandavas later on, in the great war (Mahabharata) between them and the Kauravas. Sage Vedavyasa, whom the Pandavas met in the forest, gave them wholesome advice, at once soothing and inspiring. As advised by him, they disguised themselves as brahmins and reached the city of Ekachakra on the outer fringe of the forest. Dwelling in the house of a brahmin, the Pandavas eked out their livelihood by begging for alms and collecting food from door to door, in brahmin localities, as enjoined on brahmins by the scriptures. *What an irony of fate, the heroic princes of the illustrious lunar race of Kshatriyas were reduced to such an abject state of beggary in the streets of a distant city!*

The rise and fall of the Pandavas, the victims of the vicious game of dice; the fall of virtue and exaltation of vice;

(13) The rotating wheel of fortune elevated Yudhishtira, the mendicant brahmin in Ekachakranagar to Ekachakradipatya (Emperorship) after the conquest, by him and his valiant brothers, of the Kings in the different parts of the sprawling Bharatavarsha, followed immediately by the performance of the spectacular Rajasuya Yaga, of superlative magnificence and unrivalled splendour, signifying the open declaration of his sovereignty and overlordship of all the princes in the Country. Even in a rapid survey of the events, in between, mention deserves to be made of (1) slaying of Baka, the gluttonous fiend of rapacious appetite who plagued the inhabitants of Ekachakra, by Bhima whose daring was, as usual, well-matched with his might; (2) the Pandava's journey from Ekachakra to Kampilya, the Capital city of King Drupada, to attend the Swayamvara of his daughter, Draupadi, subjugation of Chitraratha, a Gandharva, enroute and acquisition of a priest, named Dhaumya, as part of the Pandava's entourage, as advised by the Gandharva; (3) Arjuna, still disguised as a brahmin, winning the hand of Draupadi, the charming princess who emerged from the sacrificial fire, after hitting the target in the *matsya yantra* (the revolving disc containing a metallic fish, fixed on it) with his wonted skill of astounding magnitude, kindling the rancour and jealousy of the unsuccessful competitors; (4) the Pandava brothers sharing the precious trophy, won by Arjuna, Draupadi, in accordance with Kunti Devi's inviolable command from inside the house without so much as seeing the trophy in question, waiting outside along with the Pandavas for entry into the humble dwelling, an unwitting directive of Kunti Devi, dictated by *Draupadi's destiny* against the normal canons of propriety, but nonetheless accepted by the later as well; (5) the triumphant return of the Pandavas and Kunti Devi to Hastinapura along with Draupadi after the solemnisation of her marriage with the Pandavas by King Drupada, duly welcomed by Dhritarashtra and (6) bestowal of half the Kingdom on Yudhishtira by Dhritarashtra, with its capital in Indraprastha, remodelling the ruined old city of Khandavaprastha into a glamorous city with its numerous attractions for men of talent, in different fields, to go and settle there. Well settled in the new set-up and with their natural endowments of strength, skill and valour, coupled with the inspiration drawn from Draupadi, born and brought up in the martial traditions of Panchala,

the four younger brothers of Yudhishtira nurtured the legitimate ambition of performing the 'Rajasuya Yaga', with its fascinating prospect of elevating Yudhishtira to the stature of 'Samrat' (Emperorship — suzerainty over all the Kings of the country). Apart from the parting message *cum* blessing of Bhishma pitamaha when the Pandava princes left Hastinapura for their new Capital, Kunti devi sedulously fostered the idea of her sons excelling even their father, Pandu, who was a reputed warrior. The cool and calm Yudhishtira was, however, hesitant, rather extra-cautious in his approach to the problem and sought Sri Krishna's counsel and blessing. By nature, Yudhishtira was averse to vanity and vainglory, pomp and ostentation. On Sri Krishna's arrival in Indraprastha from Dwaraka, in response to Yudhishtira's special invitation, the matter was discussed with Him threadbare. Sri Krishna took stock of the position and found the Pandavas, fully competent and the time also ripe for the performance of the contemplated 'Raja Suyu Yaga'. At the same time, he could not overlook the biggest hurdle, in the way, in Jarasandha, king of Magadha, who had to be tackled through more of strategem than strength. Sri Krishna, the unique master of strategem, took Bhima and Arjuna with Him, unarmed and induced Jarasandha to fight an unarmed duel with Bhima. Jarasandha did not, however, die even when Bhima split his opponent into two halves as they had a tendency to get together and fuse, enabling Jarasandha to rise up, again and again, and resume the duel. The omni-scient Krishna, who knew the underlying secret of this extra-ordinary phenomenon, threw a hint to Bhima by taking two blades of grass and throwing them out in opposite directions. The alert Bhima quickly grasped the implication of that gesture, split the body of Jarasandha once again and threw the sundered halves in different directions without giving them a chance to re-fuse. In the wake of the formidable Jarasandha's annihilation by Bhima, all the princes, kept in captivity by Jarasandha, were set at liberty and these princes, who thus regained their kingdoms, gratefully offered their allegiance to king Yudhishtira. 'Digvijaya', that is, the conquest by Yudhishtira of the kings, all over the

country, had to be resorted to, as a prelude to the Raja-Suya Yaga. This was put through effectively by sending his four brothers in different directions, Bhima to the kingdoms in the east, Arjuna to the northern regions, Sahadeva to the south and Nakula to the west. All the kings were subjugated by these valient princes of ultra-mundane prowess and all of them paid tributes to Yudhishtira, accepting his overlordship. It is noteworthy, in this context, that king Janaka of Mithila, of Ramayana fame, was conquered by Bhima and that Vibhishana, also of Ramayana fame, sent from Lanka costly presents of gold, diamonds and sandalwood to Yudhishtira. The stage was thus well set for the performance of 'Raja Suya Yaga' by king Yudhishtira and his solemn installation as the 'Ekraja' under a single parasol, the insignia of emperorship.

(14) Elaborate arrangements, on a stupendous scale, were made for the ensuing 'Raja Sooya Yaga'. Visvakarma, the celebrated architect of all times, constructed a separate citadel for the purpose on the outskirts of Indraprastha, with all amenities and regal splendour. An assembly hall, of gigantic proportions, was also constructed, incorporating magnificent architectural designs. Far more attractive than all these was the 'Maya Sabha', built by Maya, the asura architect, as his special contribution for the occasion. It was a fantastic display of the artistic imagination and architectural invention of the master-builder, of ultra-mundane excellence, baffling the wildest imagination of earthly beings and surpassing even the grandeur of the famous assembly hall in Devendra's kingdom, a veritable dreamland, bristling with illusory projections, thrilling and tantalising. Invitations were extended to all the princes. Sri Krishna arrived from Dwaraka, well in advance. So did the Kaurava contingent, headed by Bhishma, accompanied by Dronacharya, Kripa, Vidura, Duryodhana and his brothers.

Brahmins, from far and near, also arrived in large numbers, fascinated by the well-known munificence of Dharmaputra (Yudhishtira). The priests, specially chosen for conducting the

yaga, an event of rare occurrence and mighty dimensions, also assembled, well on time. The princes from all parts of the country arrived with their royal paraphernalia, in full strength, bringing with them costly presents of various kinds, filling the royal exchequer of Yudhishtira to the brim. The vedic rites were duly performed, with meticulous precision, by sage Vedavyasa and other rishis. Lakhs of people were fed sumptuously everyday and it was a well-oiled machinery which got on punctiliously, the functionaries, in charge of the respective departments, discharging their duties very ably. Special mention has, however, to be made of Duryodhana, given the portfolio of distribution of gifts. He was much-too-liberal, trying to empty the royal exchequer, in no time, and putting the hosts in an awkward predicament. Sri Krishna, who did assign the portfolios to each member, could well forestall Duryodhana's intentions and still, He entrusted the particular portfolio to him. It was a self-defeating attempt of Duryodhana, who did not seem to be aware of the potentiality of the rays in his palms for developing manifold, the treasure handled by him, instead of depleting it. Bhishmacharya, the grand old man of the Bharata race, yet alive, had the supreme satisfaction that the greatness and grandeur of his dynasty had been enhanced to fabulous heights by Yudhishtira. And now, here is a picture, revealing the zenith of Pandavas' fame and popularity.

(15) There is, however, no room for complacence as the climax is inevitably followed by a descent, a steep one at that, to the nadir, the anti-climax, the rock-bottom, in the mundane world with its characteristic fluctuations in the fortunes of an individual or institution. The first hitch, the most sensational one, was in regard to the host honouring the guests, who had graced the function and the choice of the principal guest of honour. With the solitary exception of Sisupala, king of Chedi, all the others lustily cheered Bhishmacharya's choice of Sri Krishna as the principal guest of honour. When Sri Krishna was about to take His seat on the dais, the impetuous Sisupala had the check to repudiate the proceedings, indulging in horrendous

invectives against Sri Krishna, Bhishma and Yudhishtira, which cannot bear repetition. His tirade against Sri Krishna was the worst of all and on the top of that, Sisupala exhorted all the princes, assembled in the convocation hall, to stage a walk-out along with him. The farthest limit of Sri Krishna's forbearance was reached when Sisupala challenged Sri Krishna to a fight. The unerring disc (chakra) of Sri Krishna chopped off the head of Sisupala, in no time and paved the ground for the resumption of the proceedings of 'Raja Suya', culminating in the crowning of Yudhishtira as the emperor of Bharata varsha. After Sri Krishna and all the other principal guests had left, Duryodhana and his uncle Sakuni stayed on for some more days, wanting to have a close look at the 'Maya Sabha', in particular. Duryodhana entered the fully air-conditioned building with its walls studded with rare gems of exquisite splendour but soon became the sad victim of optical illusion, induced by the mystic and misleading projections and contrivances, getting hit against a wall, mistaking it for a doorway, walking cautiously on a solid floor, mistaking it for a pool and eventually getting his garments drenched by the placid waters of an artificial reservoir, an illusory concoction, mistaking it for plain ground. The extra-courteous Dharmaputra rushed to Duryodhana's aid and sent him new clothes but this did not satisfy the latter, as Draupadi, who was just passing through the balcony, burst into derisive laughter along with her maids and Duryodhana looked at it as but an indecent exhibition of arrogance, born of affluence galore. A jaundiced eye sees every thing yellow. Little wonder then, the bedevilled mind and injured pride of Duryodhana, consumed by jealousy and struck by deep dejection and despondency, got busy, seeking ways and means of pulling the Pandavas down from the pinnacle of their glory and depriving them of all their possessions. Even among the glorious possessions of the Pandavas, the 'Maya Sabha', which sent Duryodhana rolling down in utter shame, loomed large in his eyes and was easily the most coveted one. Luckily for him and, ofcourse, unluckily for the Pandavas, Duryodhana had in his uncle, Sakuni, the great Saviour, who

swore that he would vanquish the Pandavas and bring them down on their knees through a simple strategy. The modalities of the strategy in question were figured out by the evil genius, wishing to win a whole kingdom through a mere game of dice. On reaching Hastinapura, the plan to invite Yudhishtira for a game of dice was unfolded by Duryodhana to Dhritarashtra. As usual, Dhritarashtra consulted Vidura only to reject his wholesome advice not to get involved in something that spelt disaster for the entire dynasty by acquiescing in the nefarious plan of Duryodhana. The fond father always sided the son, no matter how disastrous the consequences could be. It should, however, be said to the credit of Dhritarashtra that he did his best to dissuade Duryodhana from embarking on the vicious project of disastrous consequences but Duryodhana was hell-bent on seeing it through, adducing many a specious argument in his favour. Giving way to Duryodhana ultimately, Dhritarashtra sent no less a person than the venerable Vidura to invite Yudhishtira for a friendly game of dice, making it look innocuous, on the face of it. This and Yudhishtira's positive response, treating Dhritarashtra's invitation as an inviolable mandate, are the ingredients in the inexorable march of destiny.

(16) Yes, destiny played its pre-determined role so well that Yudhishtira had already developed an aptitude for the indoor game of dice while his brothers were engaged in outdoor pursuits like archery. Even so, he was only an amateur and, in any case he was no match for the wily Sakuni who was an adept in the game of dice, right at the zenith of professional perfection. All vices put on the garb of pleasure initially but soon develop into monstrous proportions, landing their unwary victims in the mire of disaster. Curiously, in those days, it was deemed a trespass of etiquette for a Kshatriya to decline an invitation for the game of dice. And so, propelled by a cruel fate, Yudhishtira went to Hastinapura along with his brothers and Draupadi. When all the formalities of exchanges were gone through by the visitors, they were taken to the new assembly hall, specially constructed for the purpose. While admitting that the game of dice was a hoary pastime among the royal families, Yudhishtira expatiated, with a prophetic premonition, on the evil of addiction to it, as it invariably

leads to malpractices, entailing sinful acquisition of wealth through fraudulent means. The wily Sakuni displayed consummate diplomacy when he pretended to advise Yudhishtira not to play, in case he felt diffident about success. Duryodhana, however, spoke reassuringly that it was only a friendly match, arranged in honour of Yudhishtira's visit, a harmless pursuit and that, in fact, he (Duryodhana) had not taken even the first lessons in the game while his uncle, Sakuni, might just come up to Yudhishtira's standard of proficiency in the game and would, therefore, play on behalf of Duryodhana, the host. It started off very well indeed, as a friendly match between Yudhishtira and Sakuni, watched with great interest even by the celebrated Bhishma, Drona, Kripa and others, seated majestically in the hall. Ironically, Yudhishtira won the first round but, by the time the next round started, the element of betting (gambling) was surreptitiously introduced by Duryodhana, as preplanned by him and Sakuni, by way of putting pep into the game which would be insipid without wager. Sakuni being but Duryodhana's proxy, Duryodhana accepted full responsibility for any bet Sakuni made. The inner conflict and mental reservations of Yudhishtira were visibly reflected on his face and yet, with eyes wide open he fell into the trap, impelled by his innate love of the game and of course by the even more powerful push, generated by fate. The stage was now set for Sakuni, the shrewd psychologist to exploit the weakness of Yudhishtira to the farthest extent and the former did just that, with a purely professional approach, shorn of sportsmanship, altogether. The dice were cast and Yudhishtira lost the bet every time and still went on betting, succumbing to the lure of temptation to win and regain his lost possessions. Alas! he completely shut his eyes to the crafty manipulation by the Satan (Sakuni) opposite. Vidura sized up the situation all right. Alarmed at the calamitous trend of the games and the pathetic predicament of Dharmaputra (Yudhishtira), who was being duped, all the time, Vidura whispered into the ears of Dhritarashtra, sitting next and urged that the King should forthwith repudiate the entire proceedings, disclaim the intrigues, currently going on and disinherit Duryodhana who was literally playing with fire and treading upon deadly cobras. When the King sat unmoved, Vidura tackled Duryodhana directly but was humiliated by him

and rendered speechless. Meanwhile, the game went on, rather, an unrelenting fate played its game with meticulous precision. Dharmaputra lost not only all that immense wealth, acquired during Rajasuya Yaga, including the mystic 'Maya Sabha' and the entire Kingdom but also surrendered himself and his brothers, one by one, and last of all, even Draupadi, reckoning them all as his possessions, to Duryodhana, the vicarious winner. There was great jubilation in the Kaurava camp but Bhishma, Drona and Kripa were overwhelmed with sorrow. Nothing could be more dangerous and disastrous than wealth in the hands of the vulgar. Duryodhana looked upon Yudhishtira and his brothers and Draupadi, won over by him surreptitiously, as but his slaves and ordered his charioteer to fetch Draupadi to the hall for performing menial jobs along with the other slaves of the royal household. Draupadi, in her monthly course, was staying in the inner apartments of the palace. She could not bring herself to believe that a gambler and that too, one of the high calibre of Dharmaputra could pledge his wife. And so, she asked the messenger to go back and find out whether Dharmaputra had lost himself first and then offered her as bet or it was the other way round. This only infuriated Duryodhana, all the more, and he directed his brother, Duhsasana to bring her to the assembly hall, by force. The hard-hearted devil dragged Draupadi along, pulling her by the locks, unmindful of her peculiar predicament, precluding her public appearance, as well as her loud protest. Apart from the *prima facie* impropriety of Dharmaputra staking Panchali (Draupadi) after he had lost himself and his freedom to act on his own, it was atrocious beyond words that such an outrage could be perpetrated under the very nose of the elders, Bhishma, Drona and others. Even more incredible is that Dharmaputra, the very incarnation of righteousness, should have given rise to a blood curdling, breath-taking situation like that. But for Arjuna's effective mediation, the righteous indignation of the mighty Bhima could have assumed alarming proportions. Duhsasana dared to commit a dastardly outrage on Draupadi's modesty and went on disrobing her, an act which should make men of all times, in this Bharata varsha, hang their heads in shame. Draupadi, left unaided by her stalwart husbands and the august elders, had no option but to resign herself to the unfailing grace of

Sri Krishna, God-incarnate. Verily, it was not so much a matter of Duhsasana stripping her as her stripping herself of all the external aids, she had relied on, earlier, including her innate instinct of self-defence and modesty which, as a matter of fact, had failed to rescue her. The inner Soul, standing absolutely naked, stripped of all the artificial, external layers of covering, dissolved completely in the Super-Soul (the benign Lord, the In-dweller), at this moment of great ordeal. It would certainly not be let down by that omnipotent, Super-abundant Benefactor. Where there was just a single garment, which the ruffian could have easily removed, a colourful array of new clothes covered her body, in an endless succession, the inexhaustible supply from the invisible but inexhaustible fountain of grace, the Supreme Lord of all. Duhsasana was dead-beat and he slumped down, thoroughly exhausted. That noble lady, who had emerged from the sacramental fire now emerged with even greater glory, as the suppliant of the Lord's bounty. Bhima swore that he would slay Duhsasana, in a battle, pulverise him and drink the blood, gushing out of his viens. Draupadi, on her part, swore that she would keep her locks untied until they were sanctified by smearing them with Duhsasana's blood. In spite of the ocular proof of the hidden hand of God, who arranged for an inexhaustible supply of sarees, the impudent and impetuous Duryodhana had the cheek to beckon Draupadi, through an awkward gesture, to come and sit on his lap. Bhima, who noticed Duryodhana's gesticulation from a distance, hissed like a thousand infuriated cobras raising their heads, all at once, and swore that he would pound, with his mace, Duryodhana's thigh, in the battlefield. And now, the unwritten part of the story: the super-abundant stock of sarees which appeared on the scene mysteriously, under the saddest possible circumstances, were all worn by the wives of Duryodhana and his ninety-nine brothers. No wonder, they all came to grief, losing their husbands, one and all, on the battlefield in the great war (Mahabharata). It is pertinent to point out, at this stage, that the source of the fire which consumed Rayana's Lanka was ostensibly the burning tail of Hanuman but, in reality, the fire of sorrow and dejection, embedded in the heart of Sita, the then captive in Lanka. Again, Sri Krishna, who was ostensibly engaged, at that time, in a combat with Salva (Sisupala's brother) and his hordes, could have responded

to Draupadi's appeal through His physical presence, as well, much as she had pined for. If He did not, it was because, in that case, the axe would fall primarily on Bhishma, the grandsire in whose immediate presence the outrage occurred, for his passive quiescence in the dastardly crime. Greatly perturbed by these happenings and the resultant pandemonium, Dhritarashtra was, at last, gracious enough to summon Draupadi close to him. He sought her forgiveness for all that had happened and wanted to make amends by granting her any boon she might ask. Draupadi wanted the king to set Dharmaputra at liberty. After granting that, the king asked her to seek yet another boon by which she secured the release of the other four Pandava brothers also. When asked to seek yet another boon, Draupadi politely declined the offer but Dhritarashtra did, on his own, restore to Dharmaputra all that he had lost in the game of dice besides requesting him to forgive Duryodhana and his brothers and forget all their atrocities, at least for the sake of their mother, Gandhari. Yudhishtira took leave of Dhritarashtra and returned to Indraprastha along with his brothers and Draupadi. *But this was not the end of their tale of destiny.*

(17) There are indeed sayings like 'a burnt child shuns fire', 'once bitten, twice shy' etc. Again, the fundamental difference between a wise man and a fool is that the former profits by the experience of others while the latter does not profit even by his own and is thus inclined to repeat past mistakes. Could any one expect, therefore, even an ordinary person of average prudence and much less, one of the calibre and wisdom of Yudhishtira to respond to yet another invitation for a game of dice from the same quarter, with its ominous trend and that too, almost on the heels of the preceding one, of bitter memory? An emphatic 'No' should be the normal answer to this poser. Ironically, however, Yudhishtira did respond. Why and with what result? *Here then is the reply from the mouth of destiny.* Great indeed was Duryodhana's consternation, born of frustration, when he saw that all those illicit gains of his had literally slipped through his fingers, due

to the foolish generosity and timid fright of Dhritarashtra. Like unto the wounded serpent wreaking vengeance, Duryodhana did fear retaliation by the Pandavas for all the humiliation heaped on them. He confessed to the hapless Dhritarashtra that, unless the Pandavas were sent to the forests in exile over a long period by winning them over, through yet another round of the game of dice, their own annihilation by the Pandavas was dead certain. Seeing eye to eye with his devilish son, Duryodhana, the king too dreaded such an eventuality, which was, as it were, a foregone conclusion. Therefore, he sent Pratikami, Duryodhana's charioteer to Indraprastha to fetch Yudhishtira for a second round of the game of dice. Acceptance of the invitation was, no doubt, fraught with blatant mischief and grave risk. Nevertheless, Dharmaputra accepted it, primarily because of his remarkable reverence for elders and Dhritarashtra, in particular, and secondly, because of his consistent stand that a Kshatriya could not refuse such an invitation, a stand always supported by Arjuna, as well. Curiously, Bhima was also in favour of the second round of the game although he was against the earlier round. The rationale behind his current thinking was that the heroic Pandavas could hardly be happy with their freedom and the bounty of a kingdom, secured through a mere woman, by virtue of the boons granted to her by the blind king; if they could now win the second round of the game, well and good; otherwise, they could always regain their lost kingdom through their invincible might, in open battle. Here then is the analysis if one were needed. But the author of the great epic of Mahabharata puts it naively that Dharmaputra's acceptance of the second round of gambling and the new bets, proposed by Sakuni, Duryodhana's proxy, was propelled by the inscrutable hand of destiny. The new bet, proposed by Sakuni on behalf of Duryodhana, when the game was about to start, was: Whoever is defeated shall go to the forest, in exile, for twelve years, leading an austere life, followed by yet another year when the party should live, *incognito*, that is, in disguise, beyond discovery; if the real identity was, however, discovered

during the thirteenth year, the party shall go through the entire process, all over again, thereby extending the period of exile by another thirteen years. The last part of it, namely, passing the thirteenth year in disguise, well beyond recognition, was, on the face of it, the hardest of the conditions imposed, bristling with unimaginable hazards, the more so, in the case of the Pandavas and Draupadi, of divine origin, each with a special halo of his / her own. And yet, Dharmaputra accepted the conditions, the game was on and history repeated itself with a vengeance, Dharmaputra losing the game once again. Giving up their royal robes, the Pandavas put on the garments of ascetics and left for the forest, on foot, along with Panchali and Dhaumya, the priest, leaving the aged Kunti Devi behind, to the care of Vidura. What a pathetic picture, the Pandavas presented, shorn of all ornaments, clad in deerskin and jute robes and hanging their heads in shame, when they took leave of Kunti Devi, drowned in sorrow! No wonder, she cursed herself for not having followed in the footsteps of Madri who immolated herself on the holy pyre when Pandu died. The pity of it was that all that treachery happened in the presence of the redoubted Gangeya (Bhishma), Drona and Kripa. Dhritarashtra, who fell an easy prey to the machinations of his dastardly son, Duryodhana, every time, was mentally agitated when he heard from Vidura the complete details of the manner of exit of the Pandavas on their long and arduous exile and the reaction of the people, who criticised the blind king and cursed his sons for duping the innocent Pandavas, again and again. Vidura added his own quota of the taunts when he told the king point-blank that it was no use feigning repentance after having acquiesced in the pernicious projects of his son, knowing fully well the disastrous consequences which would inevitably flow therefrom. Once again, the saintly and sagacious Vidura counselled the king to disinherit his unworthy son, Duryodhana, forthwith and call back the Pandavas from exile but the king, as usual, turned a deaf ear to Vidura when it came to a question of punishing Duryodhana, the deft hand of destiny showing up, all along.

(18) *The epic inside an epic—the heart-rending hardships of Nala and Damayanti, once again, the victims of the vicious game of dice, the hand-maid of destiny.*

The vanaparva, the most voluminous of the eighteen parvas (sections) of Mahabharata, is a virtual documentation of the numerous discourses, full of light, bliss and harmony, addressed to the illustrious Dharmaputra (Yudhishtira) in the forest by the visiting sages and scholars of eminence. Brihadasva, a sage of great reputation, well-versed in the ancient lore, who made it a point to meet Yudhishtira and console him, pointed out to him that adversity was nothing new and narrated the harrowing experiences of king Nala and queen Damayanti whose privations and sufferings were far more poignant. One of the oldest stories in our hoary Indian literature, the story in question runs into as many as twenty sargas (chapters) in 'Mahabharata'. However, within the limited compass of the present treatise, only the salient features, germane to the theme on hand, namely, the terrible onslaught of destiny even on an ideal king like Nala, of exquisite charm and his equally well-matched queen Damayanti, literally made for each other, have been covered. Nala, the King of Nishadha and Damayanti, the princess of Vidarbha, were happily married and were also blessed with two lovely children, a boy and a girl. The King ruled the country very well and gained glory, in all respects. He was scrupulously clean in his habits, fully aware that cleanliness is next to godliness. He was, however, addicted to gambling, the game of dice. Kali, the malefic deity, out to induce mental depravity in its unwary victims and bring about their degradation, was also one of the suitors for the hand of Damayanti, the charming princess of Vidarbha but he went to the 'Svayamvara' (the function at which the princess was to choose the eligible prince, if any, from among the suitors present, according to her inclination and assessment), a day after the fair. Actually, he got to know, on the way itself, that the function was already over and that Nala, the king of Nishadha was the fortunate husband.

Malignant by nature, Kali wanted to wreak vengeance on the couple and was, therefore, on the look-out for a suitable opportunity to get hold of Nala and pull him down. Nala's inadvertence and the resultant failure to wash his feet carefully at the time of worship, one evening, provided the long-awaited handle to Kali and he gained a foot-hold in the body of Nala. Put figuratively, Kali could be said to have got into the dice, employed by the king for gambling. Soon after that, Nala was invited by king Pushkara to the game of dice, which the former accepted in accordance with the Kshatriya etiquette. The result was a foregone conclusion, with Kali entrenched inside Nala. Nala gambled away all his wealth and kingdom. Apprehending such a possibility, Damayanti was wise enough to send her children away to her parents in a chariot, driven by the palace charioteer, at the very commencement of the game. The dispossessed king and his queen stayed in the outskirts of the city for three days as mere commoners, subsisting on water alone as none of their erstwhile subjects dared to meet them and offer food and shelter lest they should incur the wrath of their new King. Attracted by some lovely birds with golden wings, perched in the green meadow nearby, Nala was tempted to catch them. He threw his garment over them but the birds flew away along with the garment, proclaiming, as they flew, that they were but the instruments of Kali, who had earlier entered the dice and now snatched his very garment. Dispossessed thus, of even the garment on his person, Nala shared Damayanti's garment and both of them walked along and reached a junction of roads, one of which led to Vidarbha. Damayanti suggested to Nala that they might go to Vidarbha and stay with her parents in the palace. Nala, having fallen from grace, would hardly agree but, at the same time, he advised her to go and live happily with her parents. But then, Damayanti, the paragon of chastity, would not leave her husband alone, in such a forlorn state, and insisted that she should be allowed to follow him wherever he might go. Wandering aimlessly through the forests and sleeping on a bare floor under the tree-shade, Nala was grief-stricken, not so much over his own woes but

over the miserable plight of the dainty Damayanti, the erstwhile queen who used to rest on somnolent feather-beds, attended by hundreds of maids, now sleeping on muddy earth. Pondering within himself that, if left alone, she might somehow find her way to her parental home and join the children over there, Nala decided to walk away when Damayanti was steeped in deep slumber. Overcoming his initial hesitation by steeling his mind, Nala cut a piece of cloth from Damayanti's garment and got off to a lone journey through the woods, the dense jungle of fate, wherever his legs could carry him. When Damayanti woke up, she found half of her garment torn off but what really tore her heart to pieces was the absence of her lord by her side. Searching for her missing husband frantically, from pillar to post and post to pillar, she got herself grabbed by a python. A savage, who rescued her from the python on hearing her cries, proved even more dangerous than the python when he made amorous advances to the poor lady, of ravishing beauty. The barbarian, however, fell down dead, scorched by her indignant looks, the fire of chastity. Pursuing her frenzied search for her missing husband, she reached a hermitage, the abode of eminent sages, who listened to her harrowing tale, the ravages of destiny, with deep sorrow. The far-sighted Sages assured Damayanti that she would be reunited with her husband after some time and that they would live in all their former regal glory, regaining the lost Kingdom. Damayanti joined a caravan passing through the forest, bound for the Kingdom of Chedi, after the leader of the party took pity on her and promised to take her along with them. Alas! the tents, put up by the party beside a lake on the way, were pulled down by the enraged elephant hordes passing along, at dead of night and a good many members of the party massacred too. Damayanti, one among the few survivors, was shocked at the series of misfortunes, dogging her footsteps. And yet, she did not despair, pinning her faith in the prophetic utterances of the Sages, she had met earlier on. On reaching the capital city of the Kingdom of Chedi, after days of strenuous trekking, Damayanti's royal bearing, which showed up even beneath the terrible cloak of adversity,

attracted the queen as the former was passing along the road, adjacent to the palace. The queen sent for Damayanti and made affectionate enquiries of the latter. Damayanti would not, however, reveal her real identity and suffer thereby further humiliation. All that she told the queen was that she (Damayanti) had been deserted by her gambler-husband who had fallen on evil days. When she was offered shelter in the palace by her royal patron, Damayanti, though humbled by fell adversity, would not compromise her dignity by undertaking to do menial jobs. She, who valued her chastity most and zealously guarded it, took up a respectable position in the royal establishment, as Sairandhri, more as a matron than a maid-servant. Meanwhile, Bhima, the King of Vidarbha, Damayanti's father got to know of Nala's debacle at the game of dice and their departure to an unknown destination and sent search parties, here and there, to locate the couple and ascertain their whereabouts. Damayanti was cleverly spotted out by a messenger, named, Sudeva, who revealed her identity to the queen, who, in turn, was overjoyed that Damayanti was none other than her (queen's) own sister's daughter. Thereupon Damayanti was sent to Vidarbha in a royal chariot, with valuable presents, escorted by the said Sudeva himself.

(19) Although Damayanti reached her parental home, yet, she was feeling terribly lonely without Nala by her side and so deep was her dejection that she did not avail of any of the royal comforts. Thinking, all the time, about Nala, the fallen king, she conceived a plan whereby the super-sensitive Nala could be discovered, even when disguised in poverty. The plan was put into operation by her father, king Bhima, immediately. Brahmins were sent to the various royal courts, with instructions to proclaim loudly so as to be heard by people all around, as follows :

“It ill-becomes a hero to abandon his devoted wife to her fate, in a forest.”

The only one, who reacted to this observation and made an emotional retort, was an ugly person, mentally agitated, in the

royal court at Ayodhya. According to him, a wife shall not find fault with her husband under any circumstance and her endurance was bound to be rewarded in the other world, if not in this world. So saying, he passed along. The sleuth from Vidarbha royal court was, however, shrewd enough to gather further details about the man, named Bahuka, who spoke, as above, and learnt that, despite his forbidding external appearance, he was proud and possessed consummate skill in the arts of cooking, riding, racing and above all, he was a very able charioteer. Damayanti, fed by these details, could easily spot out that Bahuka was none other than Nala himself. Yes, after Nala left Damayanti alone in the forest, in the fond hope that she might somehow find her way through to her parents, he ploughed a lone furrow and, after a long travail, reached Ayodhya where he got himself enlisted in the service of king Rituparna, under the changed name of Bahuka. But, before that he got bitten by a serpent, named, Karkotaka which made a piteous appeal for help, feigning immobility. Nala, who carried the serpent on his shoulders, in good faith, to a safety zone and let it off, was badly bitten by it whose deadly poison transformed the benefactor into an ugly creature. The serpent was, however, good enough to tell him that the transformation was in his interest, so as to avoid detection for the time-being, and to assure him that he could regain his original form, at his sweet will, at the appropriate time and that the poison, injected in his body, would make him totally immune to all kinds of diseases and virus infections. But, even as Damayanti was languishing at the other end, pining for him day and night, he, at this end, was spending sleepless nights, cursing himself for having indulged in the vicious game of dice, the root cause of the entire melodrama, and dreaming of Damayanti, his sweet-heart.

(20) The only way to get Nala, disguised as Bahuka over to Bhima's royal court, was to invite king Rituparna under the pretext of a second Svayamvara for Damayanti and that too, at a short notice of barely twentyfour hours. The special

significance of such a brief notice lay in that none but Nala (Bahuka), Rituparna's charioteer, could cover the distance in that record time. This plan was again the brainchild of Damayanti and it was mooted by her to the king. The invitation was accordingly handed over to king Rituparna in the early hours, one morning, by a special messenger from the royal court of Vidarbha, for the Svayamvara, scheduled to take place the very next day. King Rituparna did, no doubt, covet the hand of Damayanti, of far-famed beauty but, at the same time, despaired of reaching the far-off venue of the Svayamvara, in such a short time. Bahuka, however, came to the rescue of the king and undertook to take him to Vidarbha by sunset, that very day, if only the king made up his mind to go. It was indeed an intriguing situation and yet, king Rituparna made the trip to test, as it were, the incredible skill of Bahuka and enjoy the thrill of such a unique feat. The chariot raced forth at bewildering speed and the horses were literally flying, galloping all the while, above the ground. Asking Bahuka to stop for a short while, the king rested under the shade of a tree. During the brief stop-over, Rituparna expressed his warm appreciation of Bahuka's remarkable skill in driving the chariot and taught him, in turn, the discipline, known as 'Akshahridaya', which would enable one to compute, by mere sight, the number of leaves on any tree without actually counting them, one by one, besides widening the intellect and exorcising all evil influences. This also marked the reappearance of Bahuka's good days. There and then, Kali emerged out of his body, bowing to him and wishing him the best of all the good things of life from then on. Evil unto him that evil does; Kali, the inflictor of all those miseries on Nala, was himself tormented, during his stay inside Nala's body, by the deadly poison injected by Karkotaka, the serpent. Thus, both the oppressor and the oppressed heaved a sigh of relief and Nala, in particular, was happy that he was no longer a captive of the much-dreaded Kali, who had unleashed on him miseries galore, in quick succession. Bahuka brought the chariot to the precincts of the royal palace of king Bhima, in the afternoon

itself, well before sun-set, to the awful delight and astonishment of Rituparna. Damayanti, on her part, could sense the approach of the chariot, even from a considerable distance, through the familiar phenomenon of the rythm of the horn, the galloping sound of the horses, the whining noise of the whirling wheels etc, the unmistakable indications of Nala driving the chariot. Rituparna was received with all that regal pomp and pageantry. Bahuka, the charioteer *cum* cook of the king, was working in the kitchen, set apart for the royal guest but he could not escape the prying eyes of Damayanti and her maid-servants. The incredible feats, performed by Bahuka, shch as making instant fire with a blade of grass, fire burning without fuel, automatic filling up of vessels with water, withered garland regaining aromatic freshness at his mere touch and so on, revealed his identity beyond the shadow of a doubt. Bahuka learnt from the servant-maid about Damayanti's return to her parents and her shunning the royal comforts and still wearing the same dirty garment, half of which had been torn away by her husband, the very picture of deep dejection and desolation. The introduction, before him, of his two children and his instinctive response by embracing them lustily and kissing them profusely, his disguised state notwithstanding, followed by his meeting the care-worn Damayanti in the inner apartments, resulted in their reunion. Rituparna was, however, unable to understand, in the first instance, the enigma of an invitation for Svayamvara for which no other prince had arrived nor was there any semblance of preparation for the great event. In short, put frankly, it was a bogus invitation and even more embarrassing was what King Rituparna heard from the people around, who just spurned the very concept of a second Svayamvara for Damayanti, a paragon of chastity, leading an austere life, away from her husband, like Sita, during her captivity in Lanka. When asked about what he shall do, Bahuka (Nala, still in disguise) told Rituparna that they shall go back to Ayodhya and even went close to the chariot. But then, Damayanti was alert enough not to let such a golden opportunity to slip through the fingers and her reunion with Nala did take place. Bahuka

regained the original form of Nala, in all his erstwhile regal splendour and Damayanti once again donned her regal robes. The so-called second Svayamvara was, in fact, a reconciliation ceremony, the virtual reinforcement of the first. King Bhima invited his royal guest, Rituparna, for the reconciliation ceremony. Rituparna begged Nala's pardon for having treated him as a menial. Rituparna stayed on for some days as King Bhima's guest and then left for Ayodhya. Nala left for Nishadha along with Damayanti, after a month, taking with him a sizeable army, comprising elephants, horses and foot-soldiers. He invited Pushkara either for a duel or the game of dice, whichever the latter preferred. Pushkara elected the dice in preference to the duel. When Nala offered Damayanti as the wager, Pushkara announced that the Kingdom of Nishadha was his bet. The reader must now be forcibly reminded of Dharmaputra's wager of Draupadi but then, there it was a matter of Draupadi being brought in as a pawn in the game after Dharmaputra had lost himself in the immediately preceding session of the game. It makes all the difference, a fundamental one at that, which truly agitated the mind of no less than Draupadi herself. Nala, purged of all the evil forces of yesteryears, was naturally victorious. He and Damayanti triumphantly re-entered the palace and lived there happily for a long time. The Kingdom of Nishadha also regained its former glory and grandeur under Nala's reign, always marked by justice and fairplay, the key-note of good governance. Nala, on his part, had now the additional advantage of graduation from the University of adversity, the unrelenting task-master. "Out of evil cometh Good" is well illustrated by the episode of Karkotaka, the snake which injected into Nala's body deadly poison, which, in turn, not only transformed him beyond recognition, a blessing in disguise which served him well for the time-being and immunized him against all diseases and virus infections, but also tormented Kali, the tormentor, ensconced inside Nala's body, as a measure of revenge.

The lost battle for the cattle could well have been the last but it was not. - Ah, the blinding fate!

(21) When Yudhishtira lost the second round of the game of dice and went into exile along with his brothers and Draupadi, their consort, the tacit understanding was that Yudhishtira's kingdom, lost in the bet, would be restored to him, as a matter of course, on the home-coming of the brothers at the commencement of the fourteenth year, after duly redeeming their pledge. Duryodhana's greed, pampered by his own devilish ego and sedulously fostered by the devilry of his uncle Sakuni and the ill-fated malevolence of Karna towards the Pandavas, put him, as usual, off the rails of morality. The most difficult period of the Pandavas' exile was the thirteenth year when the Pandavas and Draupadi, their consort, of bewitching beauty, had to remain *incognito*, defying detection. All of them were of divine origin, markedly superhuman and exceptionally attractive and it was, therefore, a risky proposition for them to veil themselves effectively from the prying eyes of people around, far and near. And yet, they chose the appropriate disguise in conformity with their respective aptitudes and came out of the challenging ordeal, not merely unscathed but also in flying colours. The diabolic Duryodhana was, however, fondly hoping that they could surely be spotted out during the crucial period, the thirteenth year and forced to go into exile, all over again, repeating the cyclic process every time, so that he could hold on to the ill-gotten kingdom, with its erstwhile capital in Indraprastha, for ever. Actually, he despatched spies in different directions, during the thirteenth year, to ascertain the whereabouts of the Pandavas but all of them returned empty-handed. Even so, Duryodhana got a precious clue from the spy, who returned after visiting Viratanagara, the capital of the Matsya Kingdom and reported the rumour, gathered by him, that Simhabala, the Commander-in-chief of the Matsya armies, had been brutally massacred, at dead of night, allegedly by the Gandharvas, the husbands of the Sairandhri

(Matron of the queen). The Upakeechakas, the brothers of Simhabala, were also alleged to have been done to death by the same agency, leaving no trace of the dead. This led Duryodhana and his inner circle of advisers to indulge in shrewd, rather wishful thinking, on the following lines:

The Pandavas may be taking shelter under the royal patronage of king Virata of Matsya kingdom. Simhabala, of formidable strength, and his brothers could not have been annihilated by any one else but the mighty Pandavas. The said Sairandhri could as well be Draupadi, in disguise. With Simhabala, the terror to foes, gone, the vulnerability of the Matsya forces is greatly enhanced and now is the best opportunity to attack them. If perchance, the Pandavas are taking shelter under the royal banner, they would come forward to defend the king and his forces and get exposed, facing the penalty for such a premature exposure. With this kind of diagnosis, the plan was duly hatched in the devils' workshop. Susarma, the traditional enemy of king Virata, was to attack the Matsya kingdom from the south by capturing the cattle and drawing king Virata and his forces to the battlefield. Just then, Duryodhana would attack the kingdom from the north along with his formidable contingent of veteran warriors like Bhishma, Drona, Asvattama, Karna etc., once again capturing the cows over there. In the face of the vacuum, created in the fighting forces, due to the engagement of the Matsya army in the south, the Pandavas would necessarily have to come out of their hiding and wage battle on behalf of the king, true to their salt.

(22) Alas! the plan misfired on both fronts and the Kaurava contingent fared miserably. In the southern battle, Susarma, who was dreaming of an easy walk-over in the absence of Simhabala, the commander-in-chief of the Matsya forces, started off very well indeed and even took king Virata captive. But, in the counter-attack, organised by Valala, the hefty chief cook of the royal household (Bhima, in disguise) and Nakula

and Sahadeva, disguised as Damagranthi and Tantripala, the chief horseman and veterinary doctor of the royal court, respectively, at the instance of Kanakabhatta (Yudhishtira, in disguise as an ascetic, functioning as the chief Counsellor cum close companion of king Virata), Susarma's army was routed and Susarma was taken captive. They freed king Virata, who, in turn, set Susarma at liberty notwithstanding his unprovoked aggression, as advised by the generous Kanakabhatta. Susarma went away, hanging his head in shame. He was, however, shrewd enough to guess that the said Kanakabhatta could be Yudhishtira, as none else would be capable of such a generous gesture. In the wake of such thinking, he could also spot out Valala as Bhima and his co-fighters, the twins, as Nakula and Sahadeva. It was indeed a precariously forlorn situation in regard to the battle on the northern front. There was none left in the capital (Viratanagara) except the young and inexperienced prince Uttara, who had never been to battle before, when report came about the capture of the cattle on the northern front by the Kaurava forces. It was a veritable tragicomedy, enacted in the inner apartments of the palace by the young prince, when he bragged that he would conquer the Kaurava forces, single-handed, if only he had a competent charioteer to pilot him. But Sairandhri, the matron (Draupadi, in disguise) sized up the situation all right and influenced the prince through his sister to commission Brihannala, the dance-master (Arjuna, in disguise), as the charioteer. The prince accepted the proposal after a great deal of hesitation. Himself being absolutely raw and inexperienced, it was but natural that he could not repose confidence in a mere dance-master and a eunuch at that, holding the reins and facing formidable forces. Gandiva, Arjuna's mighty bow and arrows, *par excellence*, kept hidden in the hollow of a tree on the outskirts of the city, were picked up on the way. But when they approached the battlefield, the prince got panicky on seeing the formidable warriors of the Kaurava contingent. He lustily pleaded with Arjuna to stop the chariot, so as to enable the former to run

back home and save his life. It was indeed a terrible job for Arjuna to prevent the prince from fleeing. Somehow, Arjuna succeeded in detaining the prince but they naturally reversed their roles; Arjuna would fight while the prince drove the chariot, as advised by Arjuna, from time to time. Even so, at one stage when the prince fainted and slunk down on the floor of the chariot, Arjuna, the ambidextrous, had to fight with one hand and drive the chariot with the other. On seeing the lone chariot advancing with great gusto, Dronacharya could at once realise that the hero, out to fight the formidable enemies, single-handed, with all the fury, bottled up for thirteen years, was none other than Arjuna, still in disguise. The great preceptor was also quick to realise that it was perhaps time for the Pandavas to unmask themselves, having just completed the thirteenth year of exile as well, backed up by the expert reckoning by Bhima, who was conversant with the movements of the Sun, Moon and the Stars. Drona even announced openly to Duryodhana that it was Arjuna who had come to give them battle and that they would all be pounced upon by him.

(23) Duryodhana, however, rejoiced that his task had been made much easier and that the penalty could be immediately imposed on Arjuna for his premature exposure. But the knowledgeable Bhishma overruled Duryodhana, pointing out that the thirteenth year of exile had also expired just then. The boastful Karna bragged, as usual, that he would defeat Arjuna single-handed. Karna even taunted Drona for having lavished undue praises on Arjuna. Karna was, however, pulled up by the elders. Well, it was a thrilling battle, all the way, defying description. Arjuna fighting, single-handed, with amazing skill and speed, it was a sight for the gods who watched the momentous fight from the outer space. Cleverly by-passing the rest, Arjuna encountered Duryodhana and defeated him in a decisive battle. Bhishma, Drona, Karna etc. went to the rescue of Duryodhana. Arjuna's glorious command of the situation, tackling all those formidable heroes, all at once, was reminiscent of Lord Rama's encounter

with the 'Moolabala', the reserve forces of Ravana, as described by Valmiki Bhagavan, one looking like many by virtue of Rama's wonderful agility and dexterous movements on the battle field, with astounding speed. Arjuna commissioned the Supermissile, the Sammohanastra, projecting invisible rays, inducing deep slumber, paralysing the entire Kaurava army and flooring them down, dizzy and unconscious. Cautioning prince Uttara not to shout and reminding him of the promise he had made to his sister while leaving the palace, Arjuna asked the prince to cut the pieces of colour cloth from the headgears of the Kaurava warriors, except Bhishma's. In fact, Bhishma jolly well knew the antidote for the Sammohanastra and yet submitted to it because of his innate predilection for Arjuna. The cattle were recaptured and driven back home. Arjuna and prince Uttara returned to Viratanagar triumphantly after depositing Gandiva and the arrows back in the hide-out and reversing the roles, as if Uttara was the victor, up in the chariot and Brihannala (Arjuna) was but a mere driver, seated down below. Ofcourse, it was revealed, shortly after, that the persons, who assisted king Virata and got him out of a situation, forlorn beyond words, on both the southern and northern fronts, were none other than the redoubted Pandavas. The grateful king was all praises for them and even offered his daughter in marriage to Arjuna, the great archer of all time, the erstwhile dance-master of the princess. But the punctilious Arjuna, with a high sense of propriety, looked upon the princess, his pupil, as but his daughter (and, therefore, agreed to get her married to his son, Abhimanyu. The marriage was solemnised with all regal pomp and splendour and was attended among others by Sri Krishna, Subadhra and other Yadhava contingent from Dvaraka. The Pandavas, who were no longer obliged to remain in disguise, moved to Upaplavya, a city in the Matsya kingdom and set up their headquarters there. Even at this stage, Duryodhana had the impudence to send a note to Yudhishtira calling upon him to resume the exile in view of the premature revelation of his identity, that is, before the

expiry of the thirteenth year. Yudhishtira shot back and asked Duryodhana to refer the matter to Bhishmacharya, the venerable elder, if there was at all still any doubt about the reckoning of the period of exile.

(24) It is rightly exclaimed that there could have been no greater fools, in all the worlds, than (1) *Ravana*, who did not take lessons from 'Vanabhangam', the destruction of Asokavana by a single monkey, Hanuman and the subsequent havoc wrought by him in Lanka and (2) *Duryodhana*, who failed to draw lessons from 'Gograhana', the battle for the cattle and avoid further confrontation with the Pandavas. In both these cases, it was the *blinding fate* which made them impervious to saner counsel and egged them on to their doom. The former has been dealt with, in passing, earlier on, see para 7. Duryodhana was hell-bent on not restoring to Yudhishtira the kingdom, legitimately due to him on the expiry of the period of exile and on the top of that he was preparing for a large-scale battle for annihilating the Pandavas altogether. None could have brought home to the unrelenting villain, Duryodhana, the exact position, which then obtained, more clearly than Bhishma, the doyen of massive learning, who observed :

“Duryodhana is banking upon Karna, the braggart, who says, in season and out of season, that he would kill Arjuna in combat. According to me, Karna is nowhere before Arjuna. Only very recently, Arjuna defeated all of us, single-handed and even cut out the coloured bits from the headgears of the Kaurava warriors. In fact, he could have cut their throats also if he wanted. Again, it was Arjuna and not Karna who vanquished the Gandharvas when they took Duryodhana captive, the other day, in the Dvaitavana. Looked at from any angle, it behoves us to make peace with the Pandavas and live in amity. Any other course would spell wholesale disaster.”

The hapless, blind king, Dhritarashtra called upon his blinder son, Duryodhana to take note of the assessment, as above, by Bhishma pitamaha. But all that fell on deaf ears and Duryodhana grew even more adamant than ever before and would have nothing to do with peace parleys. Ah, the blinding fate! Bhishma, Drona, Kripa, Vidura and others of that illustrious band never spared a single opportunity to bring home to Duryodhana, either directly or through his weak-kneed father, king Dhritarashtra, the utter futility of waging war against the Pandavas. It would but be a clash of might with morality and hauteur with humanity, the Pandavas being assured of victory as righteousness was on their side. And yet, those well-meaning Savants could not avert the final doom. Nay, even the omni-scient and omnipotent Sri Krishna, the Supreme Lord incarnate, did not succeed when He went on the final peace mission. Ofcourse, it could be explained that He was Himself the ordainer of destiny and would not, therefore, like to deflect its pre-determined course. At least in this case, the urgent need of the hour was to rid Mother Earth of her unholy (unwholesome) burden, the devilish denizens whose moral depravity knew no depths. They displayed more of razzle-dazzle than reason and indulged in shameless suppression of moral values, dominated by the terribly inflated ego, a death-dealing ego, reflected right in the opening sloka of Bhagavad Gita, where the blind king Dhritarashtra enquired of Sanjaya, "How did my sons and the sons of Pandu, pitted against each other in the holy Kurukshetra, fare in the battle?" Verily, the Kaurava kingdom was doomed to destruction that very moment when Duryodhana and Duhsasana committed the dastardly outrage on Draupadhi's modesty, in utter disregard of all norms of decorum and decency. Destiny, in the form of unbridled arrogance, blinded Duryodhana's vision, *in toto*, and made him defy no less than Sri Krishna Himself and declare that not even a needle point of territory would be conceded to the Pandavas. The hand of nemesis showed up when the proffered hand of peace was rejected outright by Duryodhana even in the face of Krishna's forthright announcement *cum* assertion, as follows :

Hundred Bhishmas, Thousand Dronas and Ten Thousand Karnas would get reduced to ashes, in no time, if only the righteous indignation of Dharmaputra, who has no enemies, all the world over, (ajatasatru) was provoked."

Those stalwarts, on whose fighting prowess Duryodhana solely relied, would, Sri Krishna averred, be consumed by the showers of shafts from the world-famous Gandiva of Arjuna whose chriot, drawn by celestial horses, He would be driving. Duryodhana would certainly rue his fatal plunge into an unholy war, too late in the day. A similar warning, uttered by Hanuman in Ravana's court, went unheeded by Ravana, who realised the grim reality only when he came face to face with Rama, the invincible opponent, on the battlefield. Invincible though, Rama was exceedingly compassionate as well and dragged on his battle with Ravana, that heinous offender who deserved to be slain at sight, for full seven days in the fond hope that the latter would, at some stage, surrender to His unfailing grace. Never before did the valiant Rama employ more than a single arrow to tackle His adversary, however, formidable. Was Ravana, by any means, more powerful than Thataka, Subahu and Vali, each of whom was slain by just a single arrow from Rama's bow? Not at all. The last-mentioned could, by his tail, twist Ravana and reduce him to the abject position of a plaything for baby Angada, to be let off at will. And yet, for all the latitude shown by Rama in the case of Ravana, there was no response from him as *he was rushing fast to his doom*. On the very first day of the battle, Ravana, completely disarmed by Rama's arrows, stood before Rama, dazed and stupefied. The archfelon deserved to be slain, there and then, even according to the most liberal standards. And yet, in His unbounded generosity and overwhelming goodness, Rama bade Ravana to get back to Lanka and return to the battlefield, the next day, refreshed and equipped, for resuming the battle. Implied in this command of Rama was something far more appealing, namely, Ravana was required to take time till the following

day only for a night's rest and recuperation besides equipping himself for the resumption of the battle, the next day. But he was at liberty to surrender himself to Rama's unfailing grace that very moment. Rama's unique tenderness of heart was such that He would merely bend and not break even such an atrocious offender as Ravana. Alas! the latter, in the unrelenting grip of his doom, would not bend and he fell on his back even while dying; (na nameyam), non-submissiveness was fatally ingrained in him.

(25) As pointed out earlier, Duryodhana was not amenable to the wholesome advice of Bhishma, Drona and Vidura, to mention but the pick of the elders. In particular, the last-mentioned, Vidura, the very embodiment of wisdom and the constant companion and counsellor of Dhritarashtra, came in for nasty criticism by the devilish Duryodhana, every time. The devil of a fellow, he did not heed the advice of even his mother, Gandhari, the very embodiment of chastity and rectitude, to avoid the path of confrontation by restoring to the Pandavas, their patrimony. Dhritarashtra, the *de jure* ruler and the elder brother of the late Pandu, could have done the right thing, the bare justice, by restoring to Yudhishtira his kingdom, ignoring Duryodhana altogether. But the blind king succumbed to the specious arguments of Duryodhana every time and allowed his parental affection to get the better of his conviction. The strange part of the fatal episode is that Dhritarashtra did not act boldly and concede the legitimate share of the Pandavas even after witnessing Sri Krishna's viswarupa, His universal form, with the aid of the vision, specially granted by Him for the purpose. Sri Krishna made no secret of His supremacy and transcendence, right from birth. On this particular occasion, He revealed His universal form because the demoniac Duryodhana did not brook Sri Krishna's homily, stressing the paramount need for making peace with the Pandavas and even attempted to bind Him with ropes and chains and arrest Him, as it were. All that Dhritarashtra did was to get his blindness restored to him on the ground that

he did not want to behold the mundane world after having beheld Sri Krishna's effulgent universal form. Even so, he did not think in terms of restoring to the Pandavas their kingdom, spurning Duryodhana's intervention altogether. All the same, Dhritarashtra knew fully well the consequences of the war and that is why, when the war actually came on, he declined the offer of his Sire, Vedavyasa, to grant him vision, so as to enable him to witness the war. Dhritarashtra did not want to witness that bloody carnage, the tragic end of his sons, in particular. But then, it might be asked why the elders, who counselled peace, all the time, did at all fight on the side of Duryodhana against the Pandavas. It would indeed be most unfair to tar them all with the same brush and bracket them with Duryodhana and Dhritarashtra. Here then is their answer, in their own words. When the battle array was drawn up and the rival armies were poised for attack, two enigmatical movements took place. The first of these will be dealt with now and the second, a little later. Dismounting his chariot, Yudhishtira silently walked towards the Kaurava army, to the bewilderment of his brothers. When they questioned Yudhishtira, he walked on without uttering a word. The Kaurava forces mistook Yudhishtira as having developed cold feet at the mere sight of the formidable array of Kaurava forces and attempting to seek peace even at the cost of his honour. Yudhishtira went straight to the grand sire, Bhishma and begged his pardon for opting to fight against him and reverently sought his permission to begin the fight. Bhishma was immensely pleased with Yudhishtira for such a gracious gesture on his part. The grand old doyen then spoke out his mind, as follows: "My dear Dharmaputra! strictly in accordance with my vow, abjuring my right to the kingdom, I have all along remained no more than a mere Subject. I am, therefore, morally bound to fight for my king. I have no other alternative. And yet, you have my blessings and you will surely be victorious. I am indeed very much pleased with your great gesture of humility, even when pitted against me in a war. You may seek any boon from me except requesting me to fight on your side". Well, what boon shall Yudhishtira

ask at that stage? Agitated as he was, as to how the invincible Bhishma could at all be conquered, Yudhishtira asked him how he could be conquered. With a broad smile on his face, the venerable elder asked Yudhishtira to meet him, sometime later. Yudhishtira then moved on to his preceptor, Dronacharya and bowed at his feet. With a profusion of apologies, Yudhishtira begged his preceptor's pardon for daring to fight against him and sought his blessings. Embracing his noble pupil, the very personification of righteousness, the preceptor said: "Dear one! this war is forced on me. However, my blessings are with you. As a matter of fact, you need nobody else's blessings as long as Sri Krishna, the infallible architect of victory is by your side. I am indeed very pleased with your noble gesture in walking up to me even at this crucial juncture and seeking my blessings. I shall confer on you any boon you ask". Now again, Yudhishtira asked the mighty preceptor how exactly he could be conquered. There and then, the preceptor threw a hint, a very vital one at that. He said that none could conquer him as long as his wrist gripped the bow tight; being, however, tender-hearted, he would throw his bow down, the moment his mental equilibrium got jolted. Yudhishtira also approached the versatile warrior, Salya, the uncle of the Pandava twins, Nakula and Sahadeva, who considered himself superior even to Krishna in chariot-driving, to Bhima in wielding the mace and to Arjuna in archery. He was normally bound to ally himself with the Pandavas but destiny drove him to the opposite camp. When Salya, along with his forces, was proceeding to Yudhishtira's improvised capital (Upaplavya) to assist him in the ensuing war against the Kauravas, Duryodhana surreptitiously won the great warrior over to the Kaurava side through fulsome flattery. The tickled vanity of Salya tinkered with his conscience and made him offer his services to Duryodhana who made the former feel that there was greater scope for the optimum utilisation of his versatile talents in the Kaurava camp than in the Pandava camp where he should remain content with a secondary role. Salya did suffer from the pangs of conscience after having given word to Duryodhana.

And so, when Yudhishtira met Salya on the battlefield, the latter made a clean bosom of his weakness in succumbing to Duryodhana's adulation. Although in the opposite camp, Salya assured Yudhishtira of success, equipped, as he was, with the invincible armour of nobility. Before returning to his fighting line, Yudhishtira stood facing the Kaurava forces and extended his warmest welcome to any one who wished to walk over to the Pandava side. The call was not in vain. Yuyutsu, the son of Dhritarashtra through a vaisya wife, joined the Pandavas along with his forces, condemning Duryodhana outright. The Kaurava forces comprised eleven Akshauhinis (each Akshauhini comprising 21,870 chariots, an equal number of elephants, 6,610 horses and 1,09,350 foot-soldiers, as against only seven Akshauhinis on the Pandava side. But, what indeed is the value of numerical superiority, shorn of justice? Where there is Sri Krishna there is righteousness and where there is righteousness there is victory. It may be recalled that Rama, the very embodiment of dharma (righteousness), fought single-handed as many as fourteen thousand Rakshasas, led by their generals, Kara, Dhushana and Tirisiras, in Janasthan and slew them all, in an amazingly short period of just one muhurtha (an hour and a half). The Rishis of Dandakaranya were, ofcourse, tense with excitement when they watched that unequal battle of one against so many.

(26) Yudhishtira was undoubtedly the greatest pacifist among the heroes of Mahabharata and was rightly known as 'Ajatasatru', the enemy of none. And yet, even he opted for a war which was virtually thrust on him, instead of being cowed down by threats, veiled or open. So far as he was concerned, it was not a war of aggression but one, aimed at self-preservation. War, according to him, was any day better than slavery. No wonder then, he was painfully forced to repulse the diplomatic feeler for peace, of the 'cloak and dagger' variety, put through by Sanjaya early, at the instance of Dhritarashtra. All that Yudhishtira did, just before commencing the fight, after the armies on both sides had assembled

on the battlefield, was to approach the grand-sire, Bhishmacharya and the venerable preceptor, Dronacharya to express his regrets at having to fight against them and seek their blessings. This move did stand Yudhishtira in good stead, as revealed by the subsequent events. But, what to say about Arjuna, the great warrior of unique glory, who succumbed to weak-kneed despondency at the zero hour, instead of plunging into the battle straightaway! What was the fun of his wanting to have yet another look at the warriors in the opposite camp, as if he had no prior knowledge of those, ranged opposite? Why should Sri Krishna drive the chariot, as instructed by Arjuna and station it at a vantage point, between the two armies, from where Arjuna could observe the warriors on the other side? As the omni-potent, omni-scient Lord - incarnate, Sri Krishna could have foreseen the consequences of such a survey by Arjuna and advised him against such a move. But he did nothing of that sort and coolly stationed the divine chariot, drawn by celestial horses, between the two armies at a point facing Bhishma and Drona. Arjuna had a comprehensive view of his grand-sire, venerable preceptor, uncles, cousins and a host of other relatives and erstwhile well-wishers, thrown into the combat, all of whom he had seen several times before. Far from sizing up the situation all right and steeling his mind against the opponents, as he should, he allowed his mental balance to slip off, convulsed by a sudden fit of overwhelming compassion and deep distress at the very thought of the treachery of the opponents. Gandiva, his famous bow, also slipped from his hand and he sank on the floor of the chariot, refusing to fight the bloody battle even if he were to gain thereby the sovereignty of all the three worlds. This kind of despondency on the part of Arjuna, of all persons, at the zero hour, long past the stage of parleying, was altogether unjustified, the more so, when no less than Sri Krishna, victory personified, was seated right in front, driving the chariot and *manipulating the war strategy, at every turn*. Further, Arjuna's reverence for and implicit obedience to Yudhishtira was proverbial and yet, he (Arjuna) chose to adopt such an attitude

without any thought of how the venerable elder would react to this strange behaviour at the crucial moment. Herein lies the clue to the great Architect, Lord Krishna, who, as the inner controller of all, contrived to induce such a state of mind so that a bewildered Arjuna, overcome by misplaced pity and compassion, could reverently seek His guidance as to what would be in his best interest, taking refuge in Him, as his disciple. Yes, Arjuna did so, vide Bhagavad Gita II-7. The stage was thus well-set for Sri Krishna to discharge His role as the Universal Teacher (Jagatguru), setting forth the cream of the vedic teachings (Gita Upanishatsu Brihma Vidya), the very purpose of His avatara. Actually, the Gitopadesa begins only in Sloka 12 of chapter II of Bhagavad Gita. Although Gita comprises eighteen chapters, the first chapter, known as 'Arjuna Vishada Yoga' (the so-called yoga of Arjuna's dejection) is but a prelude. The student of Mahabharata can easily discern that Sri Krishna had studiously engineered, step by step, the earlier events, so as to usher in a situation like this when he could bequeath to us all, the nectarean Gita Sastra, the Gitamrita. *He is the great Architect of destiny and destiny operates for good as well, as in this case.* How else could one account for the failure of a peace mission, undertaken by no less than the omni-scient, omni-potent Sri Krishna Himself? Taking birth as a cow-herd, Sri Krishna drew milk from the Upanishads (milch-cows), making Arjuna do duty as a calf (Partho vatsah). In the limited context of an army chaplain merely exhorting a wavering soldier to fight, a brief but convincing lecture on the duty of a Kshatriya to fight the war, thrust on him, was all that was necessary. The omni-scient Lord, but for whose grace one can hardly move the tongue or articulate a single word, could have jolly well done so. But, if He did go the whole hog out and traverse to the end of chapter eighteen of the 'Song celestial', it was obviously in the interest of humanity, at large, not only in the contemporay world but to posterity as well. Yes, it served a double purpose as Arjuna also got round. In Sloka 73 of chapter 18 of Bhagavad Gita, Arjuna said ;

“By your grace, O, Achyuta! my delusion is gone and I have gained true knowledge, in all its ramifications. Shorn of all doubts (regarding the righteousness of waging war, arising from misplaced attachment and sympathy), I have regained my normal composure. I shall now carry out your bidding, that is, I shall take refuge in you and wage war in the spirit of Karma Yoga”.

(27) The student of the original text of Mahabharata will find Sanjaya reporting to Dhritarashtra, every night, after the conclusion of the day's war, the happenings of the day. Looking at the credentials of Sanjaya, the absolute veracity of his reporting is vouchsafed. Sage Vedavyasa, the Sire of Dhritarashtra, had told the latter, in the immediate presence of Sanjaya, before the commencement of the war, as follows:

“Sanjaya will be your war reporter. I bless him with all that resourcefulness, which the heavy and hazardous assignment demands of him for the proper discharge of his duties. I shall also endow him with the capacity to move, at will, anywhere, at any time, putting the veil of invisibility, whenever and wherever needed. He shall not be hurt by weapons of any kind. Unnoticed, he can listen to secret conversations, going on in different quarters and fully comprehend even the inner workings, the psychological compulsions and mental trends of the heroes on both sides”.

It may be recalled, at this stage, that Valmiki Bhagavan, the author of Ramayana, had also been endowed by Brahma with the capacity to truly envision the entire course of Ramayana and portray it faithfully in his (Valmiki's) Kavya (epic). It was against this background that Valmiki averred in Sarga 2 of Bala Kanda (Book I) that not a word in the whole text was untrue. And now, let us move on to the ninth day of the battle of Mahabharata. The war lasted for eighteen days. During this period, the post of generalissimo (the Commander-in-Chief)

on the Kaurava side went to four persons, one after the other, due to the death of the generalissimo or his retiring, mortally wounded. The Supreme Command vested in Bhishma during the first ten days only and he retired, mortally wounded, awaiting the dawn of Uttarayana for giving up his mortal coils. Drona was in supreme command during the next five days, Karna on the sixteenth and seventeenth day and finally, Salya on the last day of the battle. The fortunes of the two armies fluctuated from day to day. The ninth day did certainly belong to the Kaurava forces. Great indeed was the havoc, wrought on that day, by Bhishma who moved on the battlefield like wild fire, with lightning speed and massacred the Pandava forces, in thousands. It looked as though he would annihilate the whole lot and thanks to the merciful Sun, who set on the battlefield, the hostilities ceased for the day. Deeply moved by the heavy losses on his side, Yudhishtira very much repented why he should have at all come back from the forest and embarked on the bloody war, costing numerous lives. Even Sri Krishna was overawed by Bhishma's exploits and blamed Arjuna for his failure to slay Bhishma on the third day of the battle itself. Sri Krishna exhorted Arjuna to keep up his promise to slay Bhishma, at least the following day, failing which He Himself would take up arms, even at the cost of his vow not to do so, and put an end to Bhishma. The reader might recollect that Yudhishtira had been advised by Bhishma, just before the commencement of the battle, to meet the latter at an opportune moment, some-time later. Sri Krishna reminded Yudhishtira about it and advised him to meet Bhishma that night in the latter's resting place. Together with Sri Krishna, the Pandavas went to Bhishma that very night and met him secretly. They bowed at the Pitamaha's feet and he, in turn, embraced each one of them affectionately. Yudhishtira made a clean bosom of the inability of any one on his side, including Arjuna, to defeat Bhishma in battle and, at the same time, asked the grandsire how indeed they could become victorious, as blessed by him earlier. Cornered thus, Bhishma expressed his own abhorrence of violence and inclination to give up his mortal coils. True to his vow

Bhishma indicated that he would not fight Sikhandi, King Draupada's daughter, turned male and ready to give him battle. Bhishma suggested that Arjuna could as well use Sikhandi as a fortification and fight alongside. The knowledgeable grandsire once again, advised the Pandavas to follow implicitly the lead of Sri Krishna, their unfailing guide to victory. The Pandavas went back to their camp and were looking forward to the morrow, full of hopes. On the tenth day of the battle, Bhishma was, as usual, on a killing spree and this made Arjuna exhort Sikhandi to attack Bhishma, promising him full protection from behind. Sikhandi took up position in the forefront and hit Bhishma five times but the grand old warrior controlled his anger and did not retaliate, although enraged. He thought it was time for him to renounce all that orgy of violence and retire from the battlefield, true to his word of honour to the Pandavas, the previous night. Side by side with Sikhandi, Arjuna aimed his powerful shafts on Bhishma under cover of Sikhandi. Bhishma dropped down from his chariot, leaning on the mighty arrows of Arjuna which the former could readily recognise, forming, as it were, a bed of pikes for the fallen warrior. The grandsire had his bed of arrows all right and what he now needed was a pillow to rest his head upon. Even the pillow was provided by Arjuna who shot four arrows in the ground so as to form a pillow of arrows. Again, when Bhishma asked for fresh water to quench his deep thirst, Arjuna chanted prayers and shot an arrow deep into the bosom of the earth. Lo ! there sprang up, with great precision, a lovely fountain from the hospitable depths and water sprouted therefrom right into the mouth of the grandsire. Thanking Arjuna profusely for his worthy services, worthy of his rank and repute, Bhishma recalled what he had heard from great sages about Arjuna's antecedence, that he was but the reincarnation of the divine Sage Nara, the great friend of Narayana, now come down to Earth as Sri Krishna. Turning to Duryodhana, the Pitamaha advised the former to make peace with the Pandavas, at least then, so that his own martyrdom shall not go in vain. Did Duryodhana listen to the wise counsel of the

great one who had dedicated his whole life to the unremitting service of these boys, at least during his dying moments? No, how would he respond, *egged on, as he was, to his doom* along with all those who cast their lots with that felon? Duryodhana's bosom friend, Karna, who owed undivided, unalloyed allegiance to the former, had been met earlier by his mother, Kunti and thereafter by Sri Krishna Himself, privately and induced to cross the floor and fight on the side of the Pandavas but Karna would not budge an inch. And now, Karna met the wounded Bhishma, when he was all alone and paid him homage. The two of them had been so badly estranged that Karna refused to fight under the command of Bhishma and did not, therefore, fight during the first ten days of the battle. At this private meeting of theirs, however, Bhishma gave free vent to his supreme admiration of Karna's bravery and brilliance. The grandsire made it known to Karna, at this meeting, that the former was fully aware of the latter's real parentage and could always discern the divine halo around his head, as the son of Surya, the Sun-god. If the grand old doyen had, all the same, openly underrated Karna and deliberately spoken disparagingly about him, almost all the time, it was disclosed now by the venerable elder that it was just to discourage Duryodhana who was leaning a great deal on Karna's support, from embarking on war and to avert thereby the dreadful destruction. So saying, Bhishma advised Karna to avert further destruction and carnage by making peace with the Pandavas, at least at that stage. But Karna emphatically asserted that Duryodhana was determined to fight and he (Karna), on his part, will, true to his salt, sail or sink with Duryodhana. Who can avert the course of destiny if even Sri Krishna could not, rather did not?

(28) *Drona and Destiny*: It is the bounden duty of a Kshatriya to fight battles, ofcourse for a good cause, such as suppression of the wicked and succour of the devout. Nature provides the necessary nourishment for them, in this regard, of an in-built martial outlook. War is, however, definitely

outside the domain of a brahmin whose duty it is, among other things, to practise austerities, developing the quality of forgiveness, unaffected by anger even when persecuted by others. And yet, we find in Drona, a mere brahmin in rags, groaning under the grinding wheel of poverty, rising to the coveted position of commanding stature, as the renowned instructor in archery in the Royal academy of military sciences whose pupils were the princes of the royal family, the Kauravas and the Pandavas. According to his own admission on the eleventh day of the battle of Mahabharata when he was offered by Duryodhana the post of generalissimo of the Kaurava forces (the post, relinquished by Bhishma, the previous day), Drona, the brahmin who had studied the Vedas and Vedangas, was turned into an archer of great eminence *by destiny*. Verily, Drona's life-story was one of rise from rags to riches. Drona, the poor brahmin lad and Drupada, the Panchala prince, learnt the art of archery in the hermitage of sage Bharadwaja. After finishing his course of instruction, Drona got married but, true to the Sastraic decrees and injunctions, he led an austere life, facing the challenges of poverty. So much so, when he begot a son, by name Asvattama, and the latter cried for milk, Drona felt helpless, unable to buy a cow. The pinch of poverty drove Drona to seek the bounty of Drupada, the king of Panchala, hoping that the latter would graciously acknowledge the former, remembering their school days, characterised by close bonds of intimacy. Alas! the infatuated king denied any knowledge of Drona and ejected him unceremoniously. The injured pride of Drona, the brahmin, trained in the archery, made him smart under humiliation and seek revenge. His love for his son, Asvattama, provided the necessary motive-force for Drona to seek relief from other quarters, not from any other king but from the great Parasurama, famed for his philanthropy. Unfortunately, by that time Parasurama had gifted away all his possessions to Kasyapa and the needy brahmins. The only wealth, still in his possession, was the wealth of learning and skill in archery. Even so, impelled by an overwhelming destiny, out to fashion his great future in

the field of archery, Drona availed of that great opportunity to learn from the Maestro the highest and the best in archery, the esoteric astras (arrows) of great potentiality. It is noteworthy, in this context, that Bhishma and Drona enjoyed a common bond of Kinship in that both had learnt archery under Parasurama. Again, Kripacharya, the preceptor in archery in the Royal academy of the Kaurava and the Pandava princes, was but Drona's wife's brother. By a mere quirk of fate, Drona, who was passing through a forest *enroute* to Kripacharya's house in search of a suitable Job in the royal court of Bharata dynasty, met the princes in the forest itself and attracted them through his extra-ordinary skill in archery. The princes had dropped into a well the golden ball with which they were playing and, in trying to retrieve it, prince Yudhishtira's gem-studded ring also slipped into the well. Drona, in rugged clothes, recovered the ball through a marvellous feat of archery and the ring, through incantation of a mantra which pulled out the ring from the well and put it right on Yudhishtira's finger. Reverently conducted by the princes to the palace and duly recognised by Bhishma, the grandsire, Drona's position became secure as the royal preceptor for the initiation of the princes into the higher reaches of archery, the superstructure, on a foundation already laid by Kripacharya. Drona's son, Asvattama, was also brought up like a prince. No doubt, of all the princes, Arjuna endeared himself to Drona most and the preceptor openly acclaimed Arjuna's extra-ordinary proficiency in archery. Drona wanted to wreak vengeance on the proud king Drupada and, therefore, demanded from the princes, at the end of the course of instructions, a peculiar kind of '*gurudhakshina*' (the humble homage paid by the pupil, at the end of a course of instruction in the residential university of ancient India). Defeating Drupada in a combat, the disciple was to take the king captive and produce him before the preceptor. Here again, only Arjuna could accomplish this. Arjuna defeated king Drupada in a single combat, after a remarkable feat of heroism and produced him before the preceptor. Drona admonished the captive king for his erstwhile

shabby treatment of the former but graciously set the king at liberty, offering the kingdom back to him. Once again, one can see destiny moving in a vicious cycle. Drona wreaked vengeance on Drupada and the latter, crestfallen and humbled by the former, performed sacrifices for begetting a son to kill Drona.

Dhrishtadyumna, the son of king Drupada, killed Drona on the fifteenth day of the battle of Mahabharata, though not in a combat, as such, but under mysterious circumstances, by no means creditable to the slayer. Bhima slew, in the course of the day's encounters, an elephant, named Asvattama, which was also the name of Drona's son. Bhima made the quibbical announcement of the death of Asvattama, right in front of Drona, so as to unnerve him. But Drona would not believe that, knowing fully well the great prowess of his son. At that stage, Bhima taunted Drona for his being untrue to his brahminic creed of non-violence and perpetrating brutal violence. Although his conscience was pricked by this remark, Drona sought confirmation of Asvattama's death from the authentic mouth of Yudhishtira. Yudhishtira corroborated, in a sense, Bhima's earlier announcement by uttering aloud "Dead is Asvattama", followed by the words, 'the elephant', in a low voice which too was drowned in the tumultuous noise of the Pandava armies. This unusual gesture, on the part of Yudhishtira who stood well above the mundane world of duplicity, was again forged by destiny and it brought him a few pegs down, in the scale of morality. Actually, his chariot which was always moving a few inches above the ground like the modern flying trains, moving on a magnetic cushion a few inches above the ground, stamping him out as distinct from other mortals, also got lowered and settled on the ground. The broken-hearted Drona, intent upon renouncing the world that very moment, threw away his bows and arrows and got immersed in transcendental meditation, seated in a lotus posture on the floor of the chariot. Thereupon, Dhrishtadyumna, produced by destiny for slaying Drona, pounced upon the undefended warrior and

chopped off his head. When rebuked by his own brother-in-law, Arjuna, for the heinous crime of killing the unarmed Maestro, Dhrishtadyumna bluntly retorted that he had just fulfilled his destiny.

Asvattama, Drona's son, got enraged, beyond measure, by the treachery committed on his revered father. The irate son hurled at the Pandava armies the 'Narayana astra', the supra-missile, to effect their wholesale destruction, reducing them all to ashes, in no time. This was like unto the horrid holocaust of a nuclear war with its terrific heat, blast and radiation, now threatening the modern world. Sri Krishna, however, knew that the astra in question would reduce to ashes, in a trice, only the combatants but leave the non-combatants unhurt. Sri Krishna, therefore, got down from the chariot and made all the others also dismount and lay down their arms and thus pulled them all out of the purview of the deadly astra. When asked by Duryodhana to employ yet another missile of the same kind, Asvattama expressed his helplessness, declaring that, if used again, the missile would recoil on them. In utter disgust, the invincible Asvattama, the valiant son of a valiant father, threw his bow and arrows down together with his armour and helmet and walked away, brooding over his inability to avenge the death of his revered father.

Arjuna, who had taken king Drupada captive and presented him before Drona, subsequently became the king's son-in-law. Ironically, Drupada prayed for a son for killing Drona and a daughter for marrying Arjuna. Draupadi (Yajnyaseni) emerged from the sacrificial fires. How Arjuna, still in exile and disguised as a brahmin, secured her hand at the svayamvara and subsequently had to share the bride with his brothers, have already been set out in the pages of this treatise. What else is it but destiny's derision of its victims?

(29) *Karna and Arjuna*: Karna, the son of Sun-god, born of Kunti, came to be known as Radheya (son of Radha, the

wife of a charioteer of Hastinapura) and preferred to be known by that appellation, instead of his birthright to be known as Kaunteya (son of Kunti), even when he got to know his real parentage. As a matter of fact, he was brought up by a charioteer (Soota) and his wife, he married a Soota woman and brought forth children through her. Further, an unrelenting destiny drew a wedge between Karna and the Pandavas and set at naught the natural bonds of blood-relationship by making him the sworn enemy of the Pandavas and Arjuna, in particular. As a member of the Soota community, Karna was not eligible, in those days, for initiation into the art of archery and yet, the adolescent Karna audaciously managed to get himself enrolled as Parasurama's student under the assumed garb of brahminhood. Karna learnt the intricacies of archery under the great preceptor. Arjuna, as the reader is already aware, was the son of Kunti by Indra. Indra had his own fears that Karna would become a deadly enemy of Arjuna and, therefore, exposed Karna's false claim to brahminhood. Taking the form of a tough earthworm, Indra pierced the thigh of Karna when, one day, Parasurama was asleep, resting his head on the lap of Karna. Although the worm penetrated deep into his thigh and blood came gushing through the aperture, Karna put up with the excruciating pain lest the preceptor's sleep should get disturbed. When Parasurama woke up, he assessed the situation all right. No brahmin could put up with such enormous pain and it was obvious to the preceptor that Karna could not be a brahmin, as claimed by him. When pressed by the preceptor to speak the truth, Karna confessed that he was a Soota, by caste and thus incurred the displeasure of the preceptor who cursed the pupil, masquerading as a brahmin, that he shall forget, at the crucial moment, the precious astras, acquired by him through falsehood.

Drona died on the fifteenth day of the battle of Mahabharata. On the sixteenth day, Karna was anointed as the generalissimo of the Kaurava forces. If Duryodhana was then pinning all hopes of victory on one individual, that was Karna,

even as the Pandavas looked upon Sri Krishna as their Sole Saviour, the unfailing architect of their victory. But men are but pawns in the hands of fate. Human endeavours, not in consonance with divine dispensation, shall be ground to dust and divine dispensation will have a clean walk-over. Krishna is victory personified. In other words, where there is Krishna there is success. Karna was, no doubt, one of the 'Maharathas' (experts in military science, each one of whom is capable of fighting, single-handed, ten thousand archers) and he worked havoc on the Pandava forces till the last minute of his existence. But perfection belongs to Him and Him alone, the best among others suffering from imperfections of sorts, the inscrutable hand of destiny playing its own part and getting things go wrong for them at the crucial moment. Reverting to Karna, he had the most powerful arrows in the world at his disposal, the 'Sakti', the 'Sarpamukhi' and so on. But he was afflicted by the curse of Parasurama and would, therefore, forget to wield, by day, the particular astra, thought of by him the previous night. Even so, on the seventeenth day of the battle, when Karna was advancing towards Arjuna, the latter felt diffident of success and had his chariot diverted elsewhere. Actually, he took time off, to meet Yudhishtira, who had been badly mauled by Karna, earlier in the day, and retreated from the field. This apparent slackness on the part of Arjuna made even Dharmaputra (Yudhishtira) lose his temper and speak disparagingly of Arjuna, thinking that he was a mere boaster, incapable of wielding Gandiva effectively to annihilate Karna, a job already badly delayed. The farthest limit of Arjuna's forbearance was, however, reached when Yudhishtira, suggested that 'Gandiva' (Arjuna's famous bow) should change hands and be entrusted to Sri Krishna who would then make short work of Karna, in no time. Terribly upset by the elder's humiliating taunts, Arjuna drew his sword and pounced upon Yudhishtira, intent upon chopping off his head. Sri Krishna had to intervene and prevent the catastrophe. Completely thrown off his mental balance, Arjuna blamed Dharmaputra for having gambled away the kingdom, the resultant outrage on Draupadi, mother Kunti's

miseries galore and so on. But Dharmaputra stuck to his gun and renewed his attack on Arjuna, blaming him for his inability to face Karna, the son of a charioteer and seeking to shine all the time, in the glory of Sri Krishna (borrowed feathers). By then, Arjuna regained his normal composure and was filled with remorse. He even offered to cut off his own throat, by way of expiation. Sri Krishna intervened, once again, and He and Arjuna left the scene with the blessings of a reconciled Dharmaputra, who wished Arjuna complete success in his encounter with Karna. Such a turn of events, as between Arjuna and Yudhishtira whose mutual bonds of love and regard were known to be of the highest order, is indeed incredible and yet, it did happen. Truth is unpalatable and this episode, in particular, was extremely galling. It is noteworthy that sage Vedavyasa portrayed the events in the epic, just as they occurred, without any kind of editing or touching up, by way of suppressing such unpleasant truths, which could well be the welcome grist for the grinding mill of the present day armchair critics, speaking off the throat. These critics will do well to realise that among us, erring mortals, differences do, at times, arise between the best of friends and brothers, the bitter dishes, doled out by destiny, on its cruel jaunts, off and on. The psychological trends of human behaviour, perched precariously on slender emotions and fragile postures, are truly reflected in the great epic of Mahabharata. The aforesaid arm-chair critics are themselves liable to such fluctuations.

Well, Sri Krishna drove the chariot back to the war front and goaded Arjuna to tackle Karna without any further loss of time, citing the example of Bhima, who had, during the day, fulfilled his vow to Draupadi by slaying the dastardly Duhsasana. Soon, Arjuna and Karna got locked in a fierce combat but it was a ding-dong battle, one parrying the arrows of the other. An impatient Bhima, the on-looker, compelled Arjuna to come to terms with himself and settle the issue once for all. It was not, however, that easy, as Karna was going strong. Deciding to finish Arjuna within the next few seconds,

Karna aimed the serpent-missile (sarpasilimukha astra) at Arjuna's neck. Surely, the missile, aimed with perfect precision, would have severed Arjuna's head, off his shoulders, if only Sri Krishna, the divine charioteer, had not got the chariot lowered down by nearly a feet by making the horses slip their legs, a bit. Karna's special shaft just missed the target and flew past, grazing Arjuna's diadem which broke to pieces. The missile touched the ground but advanced once again towards Arjuna, menacingly but Arjuna cut it to pieces swiftly, as advised by Sri Krishna. Alas! dire destiny caught Karna in its irresistible grip when, in the midst of the fierce fight which continued, his chariot got stuck in the mire and the wheels did not, therefore, move. Karna jumped down to retrieve the wheel and to put it back in position. But he could not. At once he remembered the curse, laid on him, long back, by a brahmin and realised that his fatal hour had arrived. Well, what is this syndrome of curse and counter-curse, apart from the natural course of events, conditioned by the 'action-reaction' chain of the individuals? The former is where the hand of destiny shows up while the latter is what is empirically termed as 'Karma'. Their interplay or overlapping cannot, however, be ruled out. Once, Karna had inadvertently killed the calf of a brahmin, who cursed that the wheel of Karna's chariot would sink into a mire irretrievably, at the fatal hour. The reader might recollect, at this stage, the curse of the blind rishi on king Dasaratha, resulting in the mortal pangs of his separation from Rama, the curse on king Pandu which rendered him sexually unfit and so on.

Karna pleaded, in vain, on moral grounds, that Arjuna should not take mean advantage of the former's plight and continue the fight till his chariot was lifted up and put in position, ready for action. This was like the devil quoting the scripture. Sri Krishna cut Karna to size by pointing out that he had never thought of fairplay, at any time before, notwithstanding his unparalleled munificence, bravery and exemplary bond of friendship with Duryodhana. Sri Krishna brought to Karna's

notice, at this crucial hour, how he was indifferent to the burning of the wax palace and the fraudulent game of dice and what was even worse, breaking up the bow of young Abhimanyu (Arjuna's son) stealthily, from behind, in utter disregard of the code of conduct to be observed by a warrior of his rank. Karna had no option but to stomach these accusations. Destiny played its gruesome death-dance when Parasurama's curse also allied with it and rendered Karna absolutely ineffective. Poor fellow! non-plussed that he was, he could not recapitulate the mantras (citation of chants) of the divine missiles which he wanted to employ against Arjuna. Advised by Sri Krishna not to delay any further, Arjuna sent a swift shaft which severed Karna's head and sent it rolling down. That was the end of Karna's brilliant career, with all its fluctuations and also the end of the day's battle. Shortly thereafter, Sri Krishna and Arjuna met Yudhishtira who embraced them warmly and observed that, devoid of Karna, Duryodhana was but a living corpse. As a matter of fact, Karna had shed his last ounce of energy, the very last drop of his blood for the sake of Duryodhana. On the last day of his life, in particular, Karna, the son of Sun-god shone with all the brilliance of his father, humbled every one on the Pandava side, from morn till eve, made Yudhishtira flee from the battlefield, badly mauled, proved his superiority over Arjuna too but was ultimately felled down by fate. Salya, Karna's charioteer, who took over the supreme command of the Kaurava forces, the next day, the last day of the historic battle, had been watching, at close quarters, the battle between Karna and Arjuna. Salya emphatically declared that Karna's display was undoubtedly superior to Arjuna, in every respect, and yet, Karna fell at the hands of Arjuna because of the overpowering destiny and above all, the divine grace favouring the Pandavas. Even so, Salya and Kripacharya advised Duryodhana, at the end of the penultimate day's battle, that is, after the fall of Karna, to make peace with the Pandavas, at least then, and save further destruction of lives. Duryodhana, soured by the trend of events and the poignance of the death of Duhsasana and

Karna, saw no point in suing for peace, so late in the day and decided to fight to the finish, the bitterest end, decreed by destiny.

(30) Salya, the last generalissimo of the Kaurava forces, who held the fort on the eighteenth day of the battle, died at the hands of Yudhishtira. Further havoc, wrought on the Kaurava forces, in the course of the day, shattered their morale completely. Duryodhana, denuded of his chariot, horses and the charioteer, walked away from the battle-field, in utter desperation, carrying his mace on his shoulders and went into hiding. How uncharacteristic and strange! As that war-monger had to be necessarily vanquished for completing the formality of winning the war, instigated by him, Sri Krishna and party located him in the watery depth of the distant Dvaipayana lake with the aid of the clue, provided by some hunters. Yudhishtira chided Duryodhana for going into hiding, which even the worst of cowards would not think of and even coaxed him to come out and fight a duel with one of them if he so chose. In the fierce mace battle that ensued between Duryodhana and Bhima, neither scoring over the other, there was no way out of the impasse except to break Duryodhana's thighs in fulfilment of Bhima's vow, although hitting the opponent below the belt was against the recognised code of conduct, in those days. When, under the guidance of Sri Krishna, the Master Strategist, Bhima fractured Duryodhana's thighs by a terrific hit of the mace, Duryodhana fell down disabled, mortally wounded. Well, even Yudhishtira pointed the accusing finger at Bhima but the fiercest opposition came from Balarama, the Supreme Master, wielding the holy mace, who even took up his plough to kill Bhima. Balarama was, however, pacified by Sri Krishna and requested to remain neutral, as before, as far as this particular war was concerned. As rightly pointed out by Sri Krishna, all talk of propriety, once the war is on, is a bunkum and an idle boast. All violence is counter-productive and consequently, relaxations and transgressions, marginal or flagrant, of the canons of propriety are inevitable on both sides. Whichever side commits transgression

first provokes retaliation from the other and the line of demarcation between right and wrong becomes wafer-thin, almost extinct thereafter. Even in times of peace, it is idle to talk of non-violence unless it is preceded by non-possession. Retention of one's possessions, *in tact*, involves the element of defence and defence, in turn, cannot eschew violence of sorts. In a war of this kind, where the primary stake is the Kingdom, looked at collectively, the individuals, thrown into the fray, stake their very lives. The tantalising charm of life is, however, such that the individual holds on to it tenaciously with a consuming passion to preserve it. In the bargain, propriety is given the go-by, unwittingly or deliberately. Insofar as the war of Mahabharata was concerned, transgressions were, no doubt, committed on both sides. It is just a matter of degree. But, as pointed out by Sri Krishna to Balarama, the war ended, the moment Duryodhana walked away from the battlefield, virtually conceding victory to the Pandavas, a walk-over. Even after allowing a further concession, the war must be deemed to have ended with the fall of Duryodhana. But, as already stated, time and again, Sri Krishna was tackling the problem of population explosion, keen on ridding Mother Earth of her gruesome burden. How else can one account for Asvattama, the infuriated Son of Drona, going on a rampage to avenge the death of Drona and the dastardly attack on Duryodhana and committing the foulest deed, least expected of a brahmin, at that. No doubt, Asvattama unfolded his plan to Duryodhana, in his dying moments and got the green signal from him to execute it. Entering the Pandava camp, at dead of night, Asvattama brutally massacred the sleeping heroes, Dhrishtadyumna, Uttamauja and Yudhamanyu. The sons of Draupadi and Sikhandi, who woke up and attacked Asvattama, were also murdered by him and their chariots, Cavalry and elephant divisions were completely destroyed.

Alas ! even the most exalted among us could be turned into the meanest brute when under the influence of revenge. Asvattama hastened to cheer up the dying Duryodhana with the news of the massacre of the Panchalas and the Pandava

putras. The brutal butchery by Asvattama put the Pandavas on the hunt for him to wreak their vengeance. They located him in a hermitage, disguised as a hermit, besmeared with ashes and holding a rosary in hand. Bhima challenged the imposter to come out and fight in the battlefield. Asvattama did not reply but sent a blade of grass, charged with the relative mantra, as the divine missile of Brahmasiras for the annihilation of the entire Pandava race. Instructed by Sri Krishna, Arjuna hurled the Brahmasiras to counter the effects of Asvattama's missile. Sage Vedavyasa, however, intervened and asked both Asvattama and Arjuna to withdraw their missiles as they would bring on universal destruction and wipe out life, *in toto*, from the surface of this planet of ours. While Arjuna responded, Asvattama did not succeed in his attempt to withdraw his missile and had to hang his head in shame. *Here again, destiny stole a clean march over human endeavour.* In terms, of the compromise, effected by Vedavyasa, Asvattama surrendered the precious gem, worn on his turban, to the Pandavas who spared his life, in exchange. Draupadi was also gracious enough to ask the Pandavas not to kill Asvattama in retaliation, lest his mother should bemoan his loss even as she herself was lamenting the death of all her sons. When Gandhari, the wife of king Dhritarashtra entered the battlefield to bemoan the death of her sons, she was consoled by Sri Krishna but she retorted, saying that it was incredible that the catastrophe could not be averted even by Him and it was quite obvious that He did not want to do so. The grief-stricken mother even went to the extent of cursing that the entire Yadhava clan to which Sri Krishna belonged would also perish likewise. Sri Krishna coolly replied that her accusation was baseless and her curse superfluous. He had done His best to achieve peace; the Yadhava race was bound to perish under its own weight, the miserable internal conflicts and inner contradictions and did not, therefore, need the external force of a curse, such as the one laid by Gandhari. The inexorable law of destiny was taking its chartered course !

(31) Fifteen years rolled by, after the conclusion of the great war of Mahabharata. Following the hoary tradition of retiring to the forest] in the evening of one's life, for doing penance, Dhritarashtra went to the forest, accompanied by his wife, Gandhari. Kunti also followed suit although Yudhishtira lustily pleaded with all of them to stay on, in the palace, so as to enable him to continue to render service to them, at close quarters. The venerable Vidura and Sanjaya also accompanied them. Their hermitage was set up on the bank of the river Bhagirathi in the Himalayan forests. The Pandavas visited them, after two years, to enquire about their welfare. Just then, Vidura attained heaven. Sometime thereafter, a devastating bush fire broke out. Sanjaya, much younger than the rest, was ordered by Dhritarashtra to go away and save his life. While Sanjaya made good his escape and spent the rest of his life, as a hermit, on the Himalayan slopes, Dhritarashtra, Gandhari and Kunti stayed on, steeped in meditation and allowed themselves to be consumed by the flames. When the news of their tragic end reached Hastinapura, Yudhishtira performed the obsequial rites. O, what a melodramatic end to the lives of these heroic souls, packed with thrills, the breath-taking events !

(32) Finally, turning to Sri Krishna Himself, He ruled over Dwaraka for thirty years, after the great war. The land, abounding in peace, plenty and prosperity for well over three decades, however, ran into rough weather, soon thereafter. Rank indiscipline, internal dissensions and discord tore apart the sub-sects of Bhojas and Vrishnis and rendered them arrogant, indulgent and pleasure-seeking. Irreverent frivolity on the part of the Yadhavas drove them to the extent of trying to befool even the eminent sages who visited Dwaraka, one day. Presenting before them Samba, a young lad, dressed up as a pregnant woman, some Yadhavas had the cheek to ask the Rishis, reputed for their farsightedness, to predict whether the lady, in front of them, would give birth to a boy or a girl. The rishis got terribly offended and declared that the fake woman would give birth to an iron mace, which would exterminate

the entire Yadhava race. Some time later, the lad, posed as a lady, did develop labour pains and gave birth to an iron mace, as predicted by the rishis. It was more a curse than a prediction and the Yadavas naturally got alarmed and sought Sri Krishna's guidance to ward off the threatened evil. Side by side with admonishing the Yadhavas for their misdemeanor and licentious behaviour, Sri Krishna advised them to grind the mace to dust and throw the powder into the sea. They acted accordingly but threw away the cone of the mace, which was perhaps not amenable to the said treatment. The discarded piece was, however, picked up by a hunter and fitted in his arrow. Washed ashore by the surging waves, the pulverised mace grew into a dense cluster of rushes, with round, erect stems. The Yadhavas felt quite safe thereafter and forgot all about the curse of the rishis. Some time later, the Yadhavas organised a festival on the sea-shore. Revelling in dance and drink, the participants lost their moorings. Some of them had taken part in the war of Mahabharata and even after a lapse of thirtysix years since the conclusion of the war, memories of individual misdeeds were quite fresh. Indulging in mutual recrimination, tension rose high and it turned out to be a free-for-all, drunken brawl. Even Sri Krishna jumped into the fray, when He found His Son, Pradyumna, killed by someone, and killed many indiscrimintely. This set the pace for the other Yadhavas and all of them fought with each other and perished like moths in a blazing fire, literally rushing to their prophesied doom. The rushes, which had grown on the sea-shore, came in handy for the in-fighting. It was a Saga of a single mace multiplying itself into so many sticks of rush with which the Yadhavas killed each other. Here then is yet another facet of destiny, which turned an apparently innocent joke into a fatal boomerang! Balarama, stung by shame over this ghastly tragedy, a virtual suicide, fell into a trance and gave up his life. Sri Krishna, the great architect of destiny, had identified Himself with the Yadhava clan (a characteristic feature of the Lord's incarnations) to such an extent that He did not isolate Himself from the purview of the curse of the rishis on the Yadhavas, as a whole. He stretched Himself down,

amidst the shrubs (rushes), in deep meditation and lay motionless. His toe was, however, swinging this side and that. Just at that moment, the hunter, who had earlier picked up the cone of the accursed mace and fixed it in his arrow, aimed a shot at Sri Krishna's toe, mistaking it for a deer's horn. The arrowhead hit Sri Krishna's toe and moved upwards, piercing His body too. That marked Sri Krishna's exit from this abode and return to the Celestium (heaven, the Lord's transcendental abode). The Lord not only withdrew Himself from this world after achieving the purpose of His advent on Earth but also withdrew, from the famous Gandiva of Arjuna, its special prowess. Arjuna was sent by Yudhishtira to Dwaraka to console the bereaved members of Sri Krishna's family. Vasudeva, Krishna's father, died broken-hearted. Arjuna performed the funeral rites of Vasudeva, Balarama and Krishna. Arjuna also made arrangements for shifting Sri Krishna's consorts and others to Hastinapura. The royal caravan was, however, waylaid by barbarious bandits. They looted the jewellery, gold etc and walked away with some of the ladies too. The tragedy could not be averted by Arjuna as his Gandiva proved ineffective and could not deter the bandits from having things their own way. It was with great difficulty that he could salvage some of the principal queens like Rukmini, Satyabhama, Jambavati etc. Rukmini, Jambavati and some other consorts of Sri Krishna immolated themselves on the holy pyre while Satyabhama and others retired to the forests to do penance. Time and destiny are controlled by the Supreme Lord and none but He can restrain their inexorable march. While 'Time' is His instrument of change, Destiny, His handmaid, cruises along its chartered course on the ocean of our lives. Bhagavan is the one and only one who does and can cognise the origin, the passage and ultimate destination of every one of His innumerable creatures. My Lord ! Thy will be done.

(Aum tat sat)

E R R A T A

Note : Only the relatively more important omissions and corrections have been indicated ; the apparent errors in punctuation are mostly due to the faint impressions in the proof.]

<i>Page</i>	<i>Line</i>	<i>For</i>	<i>Read</i>
1	8	Insert ,	after 'despair'
1	20	„ „	'events'
1	20	Substitute,	for full-stop at the end
2	24	Insert ,	after 'routed'
3	6	(from bottom)	hat that
4	14	rcher... ..archer
4	15	Insert full-stop	after 'pieces'
4	17	„ ,	after 'Princesses'
5	15	„ ,	before 'in'
5	16	„ „	'but'
5	25	„ „	'come'
5	26	„ „	'the'
5	29	„ „	'seized'
6	23	„ „	'the'
6	29	„ ,	before and after 'Rama'
7	31	„ „	before 'one'
8	22	„ „	after 'Lord'
8	30	„ „	before 'the'
8	31	„ „	'on'
8	36	„ „	'heading'
9	12	„ ,	at the end
10	8	later latter
11	25	insert ,	after 'not'
13	6	„ „	at the end

(contd.)

<i>Page</i>	<i>Line</i>		<i>For</i>	<i>Read</i>
13	9	,,	,,	after 'son'
14	3	delete	—	after 'a'
16	24	embres embers
18	14	insert	,	at the end
18	3	(from bottom)	essape	escape
20	13	Pandava's	Pandavas'
28	19	viens	veins
38	11	shch	such
39	9	Damayati	Damayanti
46	4	then	than
47	9	chriot	chariot
51	13	Substitute)	for,	before 'as'
51	last line	fiight	fight
53	11	Brihma... ..	Brahma
53	19	he	He
61	7	hurdled... ..	hurled
63	12	sufiering	suffering
64	14	t	It
65	5	feet	foot
66	27	substitute	,	for full-stop after 'forces'
68	19	wilh	with
69	17	delete	,	after 'terms'