

प्रकृतेः क्रियमाणानिगुणैः कर्माणिसर्वशः ।  
अहंकारविमूढात्माकर्ताहमिति मन्यते ॥<sup>1</sup>

All deeds happen according to the laws of nature, but the feeble-brained human believes he [or she] is the performer of those deeds. When a person does something assuming full ownership of a deed, he or she also must bear the consequences of that deed.

When a person performs all actions as willed by God, he or she has God standing with them in bearing the consequences of those actions.

Krishna had said in *Kurukshetra*<sup>2</sup>, “Dedicate all your deeds to me...”.

I had asked Krishna himself, “The question is, if everything happens as decreed by nature, then what deed is the man being penalized for?”

I still wonder whether he had an answer for that or not. However, he had just laughed and said, “Sakhi<sup>3</sup>, you ask too many questions.”

My mother used to say the same thing, “You ask too many questions.”

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1 *Bhagwadgeetā* 3:27

2 *Kurukshetra* : The battlefield where Krishna used *The Geetā* to define Arjun's duty to wage war on injustice.

3 *Sakhi* : The female version of *Sakhā* – soul-mate.

Occasionally, I would ask her, “Will I ever get the training that [my brother] Dhrushtadyumna gets? Why don’t they teach me the art of weaponry and politics?”

“You are not going to run the kingdom...” My mother would burst out laughing. “Your reign is to be on your husband’s heart! The training you get will be about how to keep him content, happy and cheerful.”

“Will Dhrushtadyumna also be trained to keep his wife happy and contented?” I would ask. My mother and the palace maids used to have a good laugh.

“Why does a man need such training? It is the woman’s job to learn the art of making herself happy.”

“So, men do not know how to be happy on their own. They need help from others to make them happy, right?” I would argue. “That means women are more self-reliant than men. Men depend on them. Man needs woman... for his food, for his comforts... to acquire an heir... for many other things.” The bewildered women would listen to me talk. They had never heard such things before, certainly never thought about them. “That means women are stronger than men, doesn’t it? If the woman has greater abilities, and is, therefore, stronger, why is she considered helpless and branded the weaker sex?”

My mother had no answer for that. Not only her, even her mother or my father’s mother had no answers for me. How would they? They had never thought along those lines. The male-centric world around them had given them no opportunity for their separate existence to matter to them.

My questions disturbed them. A whole new world opened up that had hitherto been forbidden to them. Their whole upbringing was designed so that some questions would never even arise in their minds, their emotional world.

But, such questions did occur to me... because, I never had any upbringing!

## Draupadi

Childhood is the best period of the human lifespan. A person acquires true feelings during those formative years. Innocence, laughter and tears are our legacy from our childhoods. Only a child cultivates tolerance, friendship and compassion.

But, I was already a grown woman when I came into being. I never got to experience the joys of being a little girl. Innocent games, unrestrained laughter with other girls, being on a swing, playing with dolls... I had missed out on all those experiences.

The person who has not experienced a childhood does not develop easy attitudes or spontaneity. That person has no sweet memories that can help sprout a natural inner smile deep within his or her soul.

And, I was born from the flames of a *yajna*-pyre a fully developed young woman.

The blazing flames of my questions singed... singed me as much as they did the others! My intelligence was not gradually developing, slowly digesting knowledge and gradually expanding like the spread of a growing tree. Searing like fire, lethal like the honed edge of a sword, and dazzling like the bright sun was my intelligence. I had a scary grasp of diction, an astounding rapport with language... I could roll out words like a pair of dice! If someone dared get into a debate with me, disarming and rendering them speechless gave me as much pleasure as defeating an enemy in battle.

It pleased me to talk to any man facing me only as long as it took to dazzle him with my beauty, my words and my intellect. Our talk would end as soon as his defeat was complete.

I was very unhappy about the amount of attention showered on Dhrushtadyumna. I was more intelligent than him, more impressive, better looking and a quicker wit. Even so, my father would repeatedly ask for his advice on the smallest of topics. Father would discuss matters of state and business with him. If

I tried to interject, I was told, “You can express your opinions after you go to your in-laws’ house. This is not your home.”

“Not my home? I live here. I was born here. My feelings, my senses blossomed here. Then why is this not my home?”

This would make everyone laugh. I would become the object of their ridicule.

“Every woman marries and goes to her own house.”

“Then why is it called the in-laws’ house or the husband’s house? Why not call it the wife’s house?” They all looked at me dumbfounded. “If that is my house, send me there right now. Why should I have to live at your house?”

“Arguing with you is pointless.” My father would say.

“Do you have to ask so many questions?” Dhrushtadyumna would get steamed up, “Learn to accept reality and live quietly. If you keep arguing like this, nobody in your husband’s place will give you any respect.”

“Is asking questions reason enough to lose someone’s respect?” I would ask a new question. “Our revered teacher says asking is the way to learn. One that wants to gain knowledge must ask questions.”

Father and Dhrushtadyumna would order me to leave the room. I would leave dejected, and my question would remain unanswered. I knew that asking all those questions made me unpopular, and yet my intellect would compel me to ask questions.

Little did I know that one of my questions would severely impact *Hastināpur*’s political destiny.

My one question would paint the entire history of *Bhāratavarsh*<sup>4</sup> in blood.

My one question would oversee the annihilation of the entire Kaurav clan.

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4 Today’s Indian subcontinent.

## Draupadi

Endless questions would arise in my mind. Confused, I would go to the Rājyaguru, the royal priest-teacher. I would query him – about the theory of *karma*, about the soul's rebirth. His counsel always was, "Don't be so skeptical. When serious doubts surface, they result in a loss of faith."

I was in a constant battle with myself to get answer for every question I had. In that unknown realm of victories and losses, I was beginning to learn to find the truce; but, my intense feminism and sense of self-identity would not let me reach that truce.

Questions and counter-questions sprang up within me with the speed and spontaneity of waves forming in an ocean.

Does every human have so many questions in life? Is every person's intellect as sharp and cutting as mine?

The popular belief says every question in life is eventually answered, but my questions forever remained unanswered. I found no answers to my questions, and perhaps nobody else did either.

My intelligence created many enemies for me. Often, people I considered 'my own' were among that band of enemies; at times even I myself was among them!

This struggle raging deep within me was tearing me apart. Life becomes extremely difficult to navigate when one is at odds with one's own self. I played the enemy and interrogated myself... I defeated myself and claimed victory for myself... I gloated about vanquishing myself, and... felt the agony of losing in the debate with myself.

Eventually, I realized that I was retreating into loneliness. My arguments with myself were getting less and less peaceful. Whenever I talked to myself, I started getting into meaningless arguments unwittingly. Those exchanges and enigmas had begun to create bitterness in me. It was as if two women within

me were facing off with each other in those internal debates. One wanted to debate the other only to defeat her. Using word as her weapons and arguments as arrows, she would mount the assault with such fury as if her objective was to destroy the other woman. The other woman within me took all that punishment, broke down bit by bit, and finally laid down her weapons. This second woman was the Yāgnaseni that my mother and grandmother adored... the Yāgnaseni who fulfilled everyone's expectations... who was the living embodiment of the Drupad family's culture and dignity... the Yāgnaseni that was tolerant and sensitive. This was the Yāgnaseni that my mother and father were proud of.

But, the other woman inside me took much pleasure in defeating that Yāgnaseni. I had absolutely no use for that polite, tolerant, believer-in-renunciation and self-sacrificing Yāgnaseni that was so typical of the other women of my time.

By hurting and defeating that mild mannered woman within me, I believed that I was defeating all the women of my time. I felt that I was achieving something by assaulting their beliefs, their seemingly meaningless ideas about faith and renunciation.

I would act as my own enemy and torture my own self. I would watch my tears flow, and derive immense *satisfaction* from it!

I was quite aware of how different I was from the others. But, I had no clear idea about what the difference was.

The constantly churning mix of questions within me was what made me different.

I was surrounded by young women who never questioned anything, and appeared to be very happy. That was perhaps because they lived with their hearts. I could think only with my head, I lived by my intellect, and only with my brain did I try to understand others.

I kept hurting myself with that intellect. I sincerely believed that I was getting my intense and sharp mind to do my bidding. However, I never even noticed at what point in time my intelligence overpowered my mind and took control of my life.

My intelligence kept pushing me farther and farther from living a relaxed, natural and simple life. Anyone that wants an uncomplicated life must live with one's heart. Intelligence disturbs the sensibilities and overpowers the emotions. A spoken word learns to think before it even leaves one's mouth.

Questions turn into weapons. The intellect acts as a bow and shoots questions like arrows piercing the target.

सदृशं चेष्टते स्वस्याः प्रकृतेर्ज्ञानवानपि ।  
प्रकृतिं यान्ति भूतानि निग्रहः किं करिष्यति ॥<sup>5</sup>

'The knowledgeable act as their nature dictates, and the ignorant follow the dictates of their own nature. All beings behave thus.' After saying that, Sakhā asks, 'How can you possibly go against the Nature?'

Is this Nature the same as God Himself? Or, is it a deeply mysterious contraption created by God - this frightening ignorance about the great uncharted territory of existence before one's birth and after the death?

Mother Nature holds many secrets – the mystery of the tomorrow yet to come, and the mystery about the bygone yesterday. We humans can think only of the here and now, and act accordingly. All our actions and reactions are dictated by the moment. The consequence [of all our actions] stands afar and awaits us.

Buried deep in the future's womb, a particular moment finally takes shape, and it is called the result of a person's *karma* – all his deeds over many births.

That and other similar things were explained to me. I was advised repeatedly to control my inquisitiveness. However, how was I going to get my questions answered if I did not ask them? And, without answers, how would my doubts be resolved? Without such resolution, how would I gain any comprehension? Isn't an action performed without understanding it really fruitless? And, pointless?

When I argued like that, Sakhā tried to explain:

अज्ञश्चाश्रद्धानश्च संशयात्मा विनश्यति ।  
नायं लोकोऽस्ति न परो न सुखंसंशयात्मनः ॥<sup>6</sup>

The ignorant and faithless doubters perish. Those doubting souls find happiness neither in this mortal world, nor in the next world.

Happiness, for sure, was not in my lot!

To believe something without questioning it is not in my nature. Blind acceptance is not a part of my makeup.

Sakhā would ask me to accept things on faith, because unconditional acceptance was his definition of religion. 'No' was not in his vocabulary.

I, on the other hand, was born from fire. I am perpetually on fire. My mouth remains agape calling for offerings of firewood to feed my fire.

The firewood I need is answers to my queries!

The roaring fire of my many questions demands an incessant flow of answers. Even today only my Sakhā can douse that fire blazing within me!

Being born amidst torrential rain on the overcast night of the eighth day of the dark fortnight of the month of Shrāvan, Sakhā's characteristic is his water-like nature. To keep flowing, to comfort with coolness and to shape lives is his principal mission.

## Draupadi

My mission in life and my defining characteristic are to turn matter to ashes.

One is water and the other is fire; how can they ever be friends? But, the one who sheds light on the real truth of my life, my dearest friend, he who has constantly stoked the glow of my life and kept me breathing – that being, my Sakhā, is water... he is life.

I am fire.

Emerged from fire, an aspect of fire, blindingly bright as fire, hot as fire, as pure as fire, as scorching as fire and... as purifying as fire.

When I emerged – not my birth, it was my emergence from fire – my every limb, every organ was fiery hot. I was filled with fire before being sent to this Earth. It was said that anyone I touched would be burned to ashes from my internal heat.

When I emerged from the sacred *yajna* fire, flowers did not rain down from the heavens... the loud cries of ‘God have mercy on us’ resonated from all ten directions. Suryanārāyan– the Sun god – burned with extreme brilliance and seemed to rain down fire on Earth. The trees went motionless. The Earth itself seemed to be breathing fire and sending red flames skyward. Vāyu, the wind god, stood still and seemed to stare at me with unblinking eyes. The gods in heaven were shocked and speechless. The chanting invocation of fire had created a terrifying atmosphere. The consecrated fire burning in the *yajna* altar was so intense that even the group of attending rishis – seers – often had to hold their breaths.

I was a woman, but creating life was not written into my destiny. I was meant to cause destruction. That was my assigned duty and my mission in life.

Why? Why was I supposed to do all that?

Nobody had asked for my opinion before I was created; my permission had certainly not been sought! Nor did anyone explain to me my mission in life or its reason. A definite course was charted for me – a path treading which I was to cause shedding of the blood of the parents who raised me, the brother I was born with, those who desired me, those who showed me some respect, those who passionately loved me, and children born from my own womb. Everyone that I loved was going to be sacrificed at the altar of my fire. The inferno raging within me was going to obliterate them all. All those were people near and dear to me. All of them were affiliated with me, and none of them had ever caused me any harm. But, in order to do my job, to achieve my objective, to fulfil my life's destiny, their bloodshed was etched into the lines on my palm.

I came into life bringing annihilation with me – total destruction of my loved ones, my father, my mother and my brother...

Both my brothers... not just one.

Dhrushtadyumna was, of course, one. The other – should I call him a brother or a sister? – was Shikhandi.

Shikhandi and I were very close to each other. Each understood the other's silence. Each shared in the other's pain. Neither could celebrate joy without sharing it with the other.

Shikhandi constantly suffered insults and agony. He was always the focus of ridicule, scorned and shunned by all. He was corned in love, too! I considered it my responsibility to look after him. Perhaps the reason for that affinity was that Shikhandi, too, was born as a boon with the mission to kill.

Our father, Drupad, had performed severe austerities in his worship of Lord Shiva. That pleased Shiva and he asked Drupad to name a boon. Father said, "I want a son to seek revenge on Bhishma."

The Lord said, “You will have a daughter first, who will later turn into a man.”

“Why so, Lord?”

“That shall not change...”

A daughter was born. Nobody in the realm except Drupad knew that the child was a girl, not a boy. She was brought up as a boy. ‘He’ was wedded to the daughter of King Hiranyavarmā of Dashārṇa. Eventually, the king of Dashārṇa learned the truth [about Shikhandini being a woman], and Shikhandini left home and went into a forest. There, she met Sthunākarna, a Yaksha<sup>7</sup> subordinate of Kuber<sup>8</sup> who lent her his manhood. The deal was that, once king Hiranyavarmā’s verification of Shikhandi’s masculinity was completed, she would return the borrowed manhood to Sthunākarna. But, an angry Kuber laid a curse on him, “The sinner Sthunākarna shall remain in his female state for now, and shall regain his manhood only upon Shikhandi’s death.”

Shikhandini was born after the death of Ambā – a daughter of the king of Kāshi. Ambā wanted to marry Devavrat Bhishma, but Bhishma’s oath of celibacy<sup>9</sup> was an obstacle in that path. He had kidnapped and brought Ambā to *Hastināpur*, but could not possibly marry her. He had kidnapped Ambā for his stepbrother, and was not prepared to marry her anyway. Ambā was taken to king Shalva – whom she was in love with – but Shalva refused to accept her. Enraged by this rejection by the one she loved, and holding Bhishma responsible, she swore to avenge this with Bhishma’s death.

What is the attribute that makes a woman seek the destruction of the man she desires but cannot have? What degree of ego creates the urge to uproot what cannot be attained?

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7 *Yaksha* : A semi-divine being in Hindu mythology.

8 *Kuber* : The god of Wealth and the king of the Yakshas.

9 *Oath of celibacy* : Bhishma had vowed never to marry or have children so that his stepmother’s children and their descendants could inherit the throne of his father.

The lines etched in Shikhandi's palm also foretold death.

The difference was, his life was focused on the death of a specific individual.

His whole existence developed around revenge, revenge that was directed at one person. He thought about it constantly. He brooded about just that, dreamt only of it. Conversing with Bhishma within his mind, Shikhandi had absorbed Devavrat Bhishma in his mental makeup to the extent of forgetting his own existence.

Was this love or vengeance?

Or, was it vengeance born of love?

We were both hurting; we were burnt up, beaten up.

This brother of mine, Shikhandi, was not a boon from the sacred fire! He was born from the ashes of that fire. Ambā had emerged from her own ashes and was reborn as Shikhandi.

Ambā had asked for this rebirth to seek vengeance.

Shikhandi had full recollection of his prior birth. He was Ambā in that life. Ambā's two sisters Ambikā and Ambālikā were Dhruutarāshtra's and Pāndu's mothers. That those two were going to become my grandmothers-in-law had never even occurred to me.

When I saw Bhishma Pitāmah<sup>10</sup> for the first time, I had only one thought. 'Was this white-clad man, with abundant love radiating from his eyes, this just, ethic-bound, truth-loving man going to die at Shikhandi's hands? Was this valiant warrior going to have to suffer the ignominy of defeat by Shikhandi?'

A prayer had slipped out of me, "O Lord! Please grant this godly man a death that keeps his dignity intact."

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10 Pitāmah : Grandfather; the respectful moniker used for Bhishma all through Mahābhārat.

Perhaps my prayer was accepted, because Pitāmah did not die at Shikhandi's hand, even though Shikhandi did become the cause of Pitāmah's death and, therefore, did secure his revenge.

Unaware of our preordained destinies, all of us live in a world of our hopes and desires in which we have but one option. The option to move on with our lives... where there is no vision of the future, nor the possibility of a return to the past. There is only one direction open for us... one that takes us forward to the remainder of our lives. That future is a mystery as dark as the mother's womb.

Imprisoned, we humans swim in our mothers' wombs... until the pain-filled moment of birth.

For me, there had been no such imprisonment in a mother's womb. There was no emerging from the womb, no pangs of birth nor any crying later.

It is said that when I emerged from the *yajna* pyre, an announcement had rung out from the heavens. My father and the holy men involved with the *yajna* had been dumbfounded by the terrible prediction in that announcement.

A fearsome and mysterious voice had echoed from all ten directions, "This young woman has emerged to avenge the insult you suffered. She has been created for fulfilment of your oath of vengeance. She will cause a great war to engulf the Earth. *Dharma* – the lawful order and conduct – will be reestablished and a new era will begin as a result of that war."

I was myself stunned. What insult was I supposed to avenge? Did I possess the strength to reestablish *dharma*? However, the heavenly pronouncements are never without purpose. There and then, I made a strong resolve to fulfill my preordained duty.

In fact, my father had undertaken this *yajna* in the fiery heat of the humiliation he had suffered. For quite some time, one thing had dominated his thinking – revenge... revenge... revenge...

And revenge against whom? Against his dearest friend Dronāchārya. The truth is, it is the people closest to us that can hurt us the most. Unhappiness can only be caused by people that we expect happiness from.

That is what must have happened with Dronāchārya. It would be wrong to say Drupad, my father, was not at fault. His own humiliation actually came much later. He had insulted Dronāchārya first. Heartbroken at seeing his hungry son Ashwatthāmā cry for milk, Dronāchārya had gone to see his dear childhood friend Drupad.

Dronāchārya had taken a vow never to ask anyone for anything. But, as the scriptures tell us, “बुभूक्षितः किं न करोति पापम्?” What crime would a hungry man not commit?

Our own suffering does not cause as much pain as does the suffering of a dear one. Unable to bear watching his only child tormented by hunger, Dronāchārya had broken his vow and asked my father for just one cow.

My father had not only refused to give a cow from his huge cowshed, he had actually insulted Dronāchārya. Why the good Lord incited such misbehavior in my father remains a mystery. All of us like to think that God controls all our deeds. Everything happens as willed by Him. Not a leaf moves without His approval. Why would He will to make enemies of two such good friends?

Be that as it may, but this was the first step in a long saga of revenge.

Wealth and power cause blindness in a man. His eyes remain intact, but his perception disappears. His intellect becomes blinded. He can no longer visualize the impending future – the consequence of his missteps – that awaits him like a vulture sitting in the dark alcove of time, his certain doom.

My father did not see that impending future. He chose to humiliate Dronāchārya.

There and then, Dronāchārya swore to avenge this humiliation.

Perhaps it is the deeds in a prior birth that make a person commit sins in the current birth. The shadow of this birth's deeds extends to countless future births. Where you are born and how well you are brought up is overshadowed by your *karma* – the accumulated deeds from prior births.

The soul is indeed pure, but the mind's wickedness chases you for an eternity of rebirths and makes you suffer the consequences. In the Geetā, Sakhā says:

बन्धुरात्मात्मनस्तस्य येनात्मैवात्मना जितः ।  
अनात्मनस्तु शत्रुत्वेवर्तेतात्मैव शत्रुवत् ॥<sup>11</sup>

One that has conquered his mind with the power of [the purity of] one's soul is one's own friend. He who has not so defeated his mind behaves like his own enemy.

My father immersed himself in his ego and became his own worst enemy!

He could not foresee that today's poor alms-seeking Dronāchārya would someday become the royal teacher of the Kuru family and educate its princes. He would train them in archery, other weaponry, diplomacy, and the scriptures; and, later, he would seek as *gurudakshinā* – graduation gift to the teacher – retribution for his humiliation by Drupad.