

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.