

Chapter 9. The Ascent of Krishna

Dharmaraja sees many bad omens

Dharmaraja, reeling in agony at the departure of his uncle and aunt, had another bout of unbearable pain, like a needle thrust underneath the nails. Wherever he turned, he began seeing bad omens in his kingdom. He noted in every act around him the taint of falsehood, cruelty, and injustice. It met him at every step and confused his vision.

As a result, an inexplicable anguish possessed him. His face became pale with apprehension. It was marked by constant agitation and anxiety. Seeing this and becoming agitated themselves, the brothers —Bhima, Nakula, and Sahadeva— approached their eldest and expressed their eagerness to delve into the reasons for his strange sadness. They stood before him with folded hands and inquired, “Lord and master! Day by day we find your countenance rendered dimmer and dimmer; you seem sunk in unfathomable agony, sinking deeper and deeper with every passing hour. You have become too weak to stand firm. If any of us has caused you pain, please tell us; we will guard ourselves against repetition, and we pray for pardon. If all this is due to something else, you have only to tell us about it, we will set it right and restore your mind at the cost of our very lives. When you have such heroes, obedient as we are, to correct anyone, however high and mighty, it’s not proper for you to give vent to grief. Tell us the reason and command us what to do,”

Dharmaraja replied: “What can I tell you, dear brothers? I see ominous things all round. From the homes of ordinary citizens to the hermitages of the saints and sages, wherever my eye falls I see only inauspiciousness, ill fortune, and the negation of joy. I argued within myself that this was only the result of my warped imagination, and I tried my best to muster up courage and confidence. I don’t like to fall a prey to my fears. But, I couldn’t succeed. Recollecting the scenes made my fear even more fearsome.

Forebodings of the onset of Kali

“To aggravate the sadness, I saw some scenes that are contrary to established morals and *dharma*. Not only did they come to my actual notice, but the courts of justice in this kingdom have been receiving petitions and pleas regarding wrongs, injustices, iniquities, and misdeeds. This makes me grieve deeply. “I saw some situations that were even worse. Last evening, when returning from a tour of the kingdom, I saw a mother cow refusing to nurse and feed her new-born calf! This is quite strange and contrary to nature. I saw some women wantonly loitering in the bazaar. I hoped that they would rush into their homes when they saw me, but no, it didn’t happen. They had no reverence for authority; they went on as if I was not in the picture; they continued to talk without restraint to the menfolk. I saw all this with my own eyes. I simply went away from that horrid place.

“Very near the palace, when I was about to enter it, I perceived *brahmins* selling milk and curds! I saw people emerging from their houses and closing the doors behind them. I found them fixing some iron lump to them, so that they couldn’t be opened! [The reference is evidently to locks, which were strange things in Dharmaraja’s kingdom, for no one had any fear of thieves.] My mind was very much concerned with all these tragic transformations.

“I tried to forget this state of affairs and started doing the evening rituals, the sacred rite of offering oblations to the consecrated fire, and shall I tell you what happened? The fire couldn’t be lit, however hard I tried! O, what a calamity it was. My fears that these events foreboded some great catastrophe is fed by other happenings as well. Every minute they confirm my premonitions. I find myself too weak to overcome them.

“Perhaps the *Kali* era has begun or is about to begin, I believe. For how else are we to explain such facts as this: a wife quarreled with her husband and is arguing before the judge in court that she should be permitted to go to her parents, leaving him to himself. How am I to face such a plea in court that she be permitted to dissolve the marriage and leave for her parents’ home, deserting her husband? A petition from such a wife was admitted yesterday in the Court of Justice! How am I to ignore such abominations?

“Why go on recounting these occurrences? Yesterday, the horses in the royal stables started weeping, did you hear? They were shedding copious tears, the grooms reported. Sahadeva tried to investigate the causes of their deep sorrow, but he couldn’t discover why, and he was struck with wonder and consternation. These are indications of wholesale destruction, not of any minor danger or small evil.” Dharmaraja placed his chin on his upright arm and rested a while, in deep thought

Bhima didn’t give way to despair. He laughed scornfully and began, “The incidents and events you mention might have happened; I don’t deny them. But how can they bring disaster to us? Why should we give up hope? All these abnormalities can be set right by administrative measures and their enforcement. Your worry over such small matters, which we can correct, is really surprising. Or do you fear the imminent breaking out of another war? Perhaps you are anxious to avoid the ravages that the revival of war might bring about. That contingency is impossible, for all our foes have been exterminated, with their kith and kin. Only we five are left, and we have to seek friends and foes only among ourselves. Rivalry won’t break out among us, even in our dreams. So what agitates you? I don’t understand why you are afflicted. People will laugh at you when you take these little things to heart and lose peace of mind.” Bhima said this and, changing his mighty mace from the right hand to the left, laughed a laugh that was half a jeer.

Dharmaraja suspects the disappearance of Krishna

Dharmaraja replied, “I have the same discrimination and intelligence that you have in these matters. Nor do I have an iota of dread that enemies will overpower us. Didn’t we defeat the renowned warriors Bhishma, Drona, and the rest, who could singly and with but one arrow destroy the three worlds? What can any foe do to us? And what can agitate us, we who bear even the direst calamities with fortitude. How can any difference arise between us now, who stood so firm in the days of distress?

“Perhaps you suspect that I am afraid of anything happening to me personally. No, I will never be agitated by anything that might happen to me, for this body is a bubble upon the waters; it is a composite of the five elements waiting to be dissolved back into its components. The dissolution must happen some day; the body is bound to fail, fall, fester, and be reduced to ash or mud. I don’t pay heed to its fate.

“My only worry is of one particular matter. I’ll disclose it to you without any attempt to conceal its seriousness. Listen. It is now more or less seven months since Arjuna, our brother, left for Dwaraka. Yet, we haven’t heard anything about the welfare and well-being of the Lord of Dwaraka. He didn’t even send a message regarding, at least, his arrival in Dwaraka. Of course I’m not worried in the least about Arjuna and his reaching or not

reaching Dwaraka. I know that no foe can stand up against him. Moreover, if anything untoward had happened to him, certainly, Krishna would have sent the information to us; of this there is no doubt. So, I am confident that there is no reason to be nervous about him.

“Let me confess: I’m worried about the Lord Himself. My anxiety increases with every passing minute. My heart suffers unbearable agony. I’m overwhelmed by the fear that He may leave this world and resume his permanent abode. What greater reason can there be for sorrow? “If this catastrophe has actually come about, I won’t continue to rule this land, widowed by the disappearance of the Master. For us Pandavas, this Vaasudeva was all our five vital airs put together; and when He departs, we are but corpses, devoid of vitality. If the Lord is upon the earth, such ominous signs dare not reveal themselves. Injustice and iniquity can have free play only when He is absent; I have no doubt about this. My conscience is clear about it; something tells me that this is the truth.”

At this, the brothers fell into the depth of grief. They lost all trace of courage. Bhima was the first to recover sufficiently to speak. He mustered some courage in spite of the wave of sadness that smothered him. “Don’t picture such a dire calamity and start imagining a catastrophe just because Arjuna hasn’t returned or because we haven’t heard from him. There must be another reason for Arjuna’s silence, or else Krishna Himself might have neglected to inform us. Let’s wait and seek further light; let’s not yield to the fantasies that a nervous mind might weave. Let’s not clothe them with the vesture of truth. I’m encouraged to speak like this, for one’s nervousness is often capable of shaping such fears.”

But Dharmaraja was in no mood to accept this. He replied: “Whatever you say, however skillfully you argue, I feel that my interpretation is correct. Or else how can such an idea arise in my mind? My left shoulder is registering a shiver, see? This sign confirms my fear that this has actually happened. You know it’s a bad omen if the left shoulder shivers for men and the right for women. This thing has taken place in my body, and it is a bad omen. Not merely the shoulder but the entire being—mind, body, intelligence—all are in a shiver. My eyes grow dim, and I am fast losing vision. I see the world as an orphan, having been deprived of its Guardian and Lord. I have lost the faculty of hearing. My legs are shaking helplessly. My limbs have been petrified. They have no life in them.

“What greater proof do you need to assert that the Lord has left? Believe me, dear brothers. Even if you don’t, facts won’t change. The earth is shaking under our feet. Don’t you hear the eerie noises emanating from the agonised heart of the earth? Tanks and lakes are shaken into waves. The sky, air, fire, waters, and the earth all moaning their fate, for they have lost their Master.

“How much more evidence do you need to be convinced? News came some days back of showers of blood raining in some parts of our kingdom.”

Hearing these words, streams of tears coursed down the cheeks of Nakula and Sahadeva, even as they stood before their brother. Their hearts were struck with pain and they couldn’t stand, for their legs failed them.