

Chapter 17. Recalling the Bygone Days

Emperor Parikshith journeyed in state over the entire Indian continent, acquainting himself with the administrative excellence of the rule of his grandfathers, with the unique relationship they had established between themselves and Lord Krishna, who had then come down on earth as man, listening to the experiences of many a saint and scholar living in those halcyon days and reflecting on those cheering memories, as he traveled along. Often he was overcome with remorse at the thought that he was not alive during the days when the grandparents were in such heavenly bliss.

While immersed in the joy of recollecting the annals of his forefathers and the glory of those bygone days with Krishna, Vyasa, the great sage, appeared quite unexpectedly. Parikshith welcomed him with great honour and seated him on an elevated seat. The sage praised Parikshith's rule and said that he was reminded of the reign of the Pandavas. The young king listened reverentially.

After some time, Vyasa said, "Son, I must be going."

How Parikshith was named by Krishna

But Parikshith said, "It's like placing a dish of delicacies before a starving man and just when he is about to stretch his hand toward it, dragging it away. Your accounts of the adventures of my grandfathers and of the splendour of Sri Krishna are like the most precious gems spread out before me. But you cause the most painful disappointment to me by refusing to let me have them. Your leaving me just now makes me feel desperately sorry."

He pleaded with the sage to stay a little longer. "Tell me why you came. Be with me for some more time and assuage the hunger that is gnawing me. I missed the great good fortune that my grandparents had to spend their lives with the Lord Himself. I'll save myself from decline at least by listening to their exploits and their devotion, which drew upon them His grace."

Seeing the king praying in great earnestness and humility, Vyasa said, "Son do not feel that you are in any way inferior or less endowed with good fortune. I declare that no one else had such good fortune as you earned. For you drew upon yourself the grace of the Lord the moment you were born. The Lord, Vaasudeva, gave you the breath of life; He raised you in His arms and played with you while you were yet a baby. And you so closely stuck to Him that you scarcely kept aloof. Your youngest grandfather, Sahadeva, had to pluck you by force from Krishna and hand you over to the women in the inner halls.

"You were named ceremonially by Vaasudeva Himself. What a memorable scene it was! You showed us that you were a wonderful child. Your eyes followed the Lord wherever He moved, whichever way He turned. You were intent on "finding out (*pariksha*)" where He was, as if no one else was in the hall that day. Krishna hid Himself very cleverly behind pillars and tried various means to divert your attention from Him; but you proved too clever even for Him! Your eyes searched for Him alone; they saw only Him and His splendid form.

All of us present were wonder-struck at your devotion and concentration. It appeared as if you were examining each face and trying to find out whether it was Krishna's; your face fell when you saw it was not; it blossomed when your eyes saw Him and Him only. Scholars and simple folks, peasants and rulers—all realised that you were a remarkable child. That's why, when your grandfather Dharmaraja asked to Him to give you an appropriate

name, He named you after your strange behaviour: Parikshith (he who examines, he who tries to find out).

“When the Lord announced this name to Dharmaraja in the hearing of that vast gathering of courtiers, scholars, and sages, they all applauded, saying, ‘Very apt, excellent, fine.’ Being so richly favoured by fortune, it’s not right for you to condemn yourself as unlucky. You were fondled by the Lord; He played with you and watched your gambols; He gave you your name. How few earn this fortune. Don’t consider these just common gifts of grace.”

Tears of joy welled from Parikshith’s eyes. A question rose up in his throat, but Vyasa saw him swallowing it, so he patted him on the shoulder and encouraged him to ask it. “Son, it looks as if you want to ask me something. Ask without hesitation; don’t quail.”

Parikshith pleads for more tales of Krishna

Taking courage from this prompting, Parikshith said, “Worthy master! Man cannot know the value of either joy or grief unless he is aware of them. The joyful contacts of which you spoke now were awarded me when I was scarcely aware of the bliss inherent in them. Real joy can be tasted only when one is conscious of its value. A child, given a billion-rupee diamond, will deal with it only as a lump of glass. The happiness of being with the Lord, which you say I had in my childhood, is as ineffective as the joy experienced in past births. I didn’t know then what precious moments they were. Had I known, were I capable of knowing, I could have treasured that joy forever. Now it is all mere inference. I have no ocular proof of the Lord’s grace that I received then, so I depend now on auricular proof only. Please tell me of Krishna’s greatness and glory; let my ears drink the nectar of those stories.”

Vyasa was moved and agreed. “Son, do you consider His plays (*leelas*) to be just one or two? How can I relate them to you, since they are beyond one’s capacity to enumerate? So ask about what He did in connection with some particular person, or during some particular incident or situation; I’ll gladly tell you all the details.”

How Arjuna wins Droupadi’s hand

Parikshith was elated. He begged him with folded hands, “Master! Tell me how this great attachment between my grandparents and Lord Krishna was born.”

Vyasa burst into laughter. “Son, your earnestness surprises me. Only such earnest individuals can get spiritual wisdom (*jnana*), and I’m delighted that you have such a deep yearning. So I’ll tell you what you asked for. Listen!”

Saying this, Vyasa made himself comfortable in his seat. Parikshith also got ready to hear, with a heart that was blossoming with joy and ears that widened in the ambition to learn.

“Son! King Drupada grew anxious to give his only daughter in marriage to a suitable groom but couldn’t succeed in securing one, in spite of the most diligent search. So he announced a festival for choice of bridegroom. Kings of great might and majesty assembled in his capital, along with scholars endowed with charming personality, all eager to wed the princess, whose beauty was unexcelled in the three worlds. They were all proud of their wealth and valour, for they felt they could win her by those attainments.

“In the assembly hall, the king had fixed a contrivance on a pillar. It was a fast-revolving wheel, which was

reflected in a sheet of water below the pillar on which it turned. The wheel had a ‘fish’ tied on it. One by one, the competitors for the hand of the princess were asked to come forward and, drawing the bow while looking at the reflection, shoot at the fish target up above. Drupada announced his intention to give his daughter in marriage to whomever hit the target. The city was full of princes and kings who wanted to try their hands at this unique festival of bowmanship.

“News of the festival reached the ears of your grandparents, who had assumed the role of *brahmins* to mislead the wily Kauravas. At first, they felt they shouldn’t come out in the open on that occasion, but Arjuna, your grandfather, was able to persuade his brothers to attend the festival. No prince (*kshatriya*), he said, should stay away when bowmen compete for a worthy prize.

“Thus, the five brothers sat among the assembly in the garb of *brahmins*, like a group of lions, casting a halo of heroism around. All eyes were drawn toward them. People commented on their presence, many in admiration and some in derision. Some praised them as champions; some laughed at them as prize fighters or cooks. The whispers aroused by them spread all round.

“Lord Krishna had come for the festival. His eyes were fixed on Arjuna all the time; this was noticed by Krishna’s brother, Balarama, who said something to Krishna. At last, the bridegroom contest began. One by one, the candidates proceeded to the shadow seen in the water and aimed the arrow at the ‘fish’ rotating above. They failed and returned, pale with humiliation. They walked back to their seats, heavy with disappointment and shame, and sat sunk in sorrow.

“Krishna had no intention of rising and having a try at the target. He sat quietly in His own place. If He had wanted, He could have quite easily hit the ‘fish’ and won. But, who can gauge the depths of His mind?

“Just then, Arjuna rose and walked toward the contrivance, casting a lightning flash of brilliance over the assembly by the heroic aura of his personality. Droupadi, the princess, lifted her head and watched him in admiration. Her mind merged in that flash of light. In an instant, Arjuna’s arrow split the ‘fish’, and he won. The applause of the gathering rose to the skies. The princess came forward and wedded him, placing a garland of flowers around his neck and holding his hand.

“When Arjuna emerged from the hall, holding the hand of the bride, the horde of defeated kings and princes yelled that the rules of the contest were broken, since a *brahmin*, who had no right to compete in bowmanship, was allowed to participate and was declared the winner. They fell on your grandfather in an angry clump. But Bhima pulled out a huge tree by its roots and whirled it at the crowd of foiled kings.”

Krishna introduces Himself and advises Arjuna

“Observing the fight between the disappointed groups of suitors and the Pandava brothers, Krishna and Balarama smiled within themselves in appreciation of Arjuna’s successful feat. Your grandfathers had no knowledge who they were; they had not seen them previously.

“The Pandavas reached their residence —the humble home of a potter— with the newly-won bride, Drupada’s daughter. While Dharmaraja, the eldest brother, was describing the events of the day with great exultation, Balarama and Krishna, dressed in yellow silk and magnificent to behold, entered the lowly cottage. They fell at the feet of aged Kunthi, mother of your grandfathers. ‘Auntie, we are your nephews,’ they said. ‘We are Nanda’s and Yasoda’s children.’ Then, they touched Dharmaraja’s feet, prostrating themselves before him.

“Krishna approached Arjuna and drew him aside, with a sweet simple expression of affection. ‘I know you, but you don’t know me, I’m seeing you for the very first time. I am the son of Vasudeva. My name is Sri Krishna. I’m younger than you are; still, when you achieved that victory in the royal palace, I recognised you as the Pandava brothers, and I understood that you had escaped from the palace wherein you were when it was set on fire. From the moment my eyes fell on you at the gathering of suitors, I somehow felt that you were Arjuna, and I told my brother so. This is my brother, Balarama. I was very happy that I recognised you, and my brother shared the joy. At last, I am able to meet you. The bride is the embodiment of virtue and intelligence.’

“Speaking thus, Krishna called Arjuna to a distance and whispered in his ear, ‘Cousin! It’s not advisable for you to come out in the open so soon. Stay in disguise for short periods, in one place or other, for some more time.’ Then, He took leave of His aunt and others and left with His elder brother, Balarama.

Krishna and Arjuna were close, like body and breath

“From that day, the affection between Krishna and Arjuna grew more and more intense; it grew into a huge tree and yielded fruits rich with sweetness, which they shared; in that sweetness, their minds merged and became one. Note that the first time your grandfather met Lord Sri Krishna, He was at the wedding hall of Droupadi. The significance of this lies in the fact that they too were bound throughout the years in bonds of love and affection of unflinching friendship. To consummate that friendship, Krishna taught him the highest wisdom. Did you note how chummy that Consummate Trickster was with your grandfather?”

Vyasa rose and collected his things, in an attempt to depart. But Parikshith pleaded piteously, wiping tears of joy away, “Master, you made the Lord stand clear before me with your description of His divine play (*leela*) and His grace. Please tell me more of the many occasions on which the Lord showered His Mercy on my grandfathers, how He moved close with them and rescued them from calamity. Sleep is deserting my eyes and prompting me to listen to the stories of God. Make this night holy by relating to me the glory of the Lord. That alone can give me satisfaction. Let me spend the night in His thoughts. Your silence is causing me great agony.”

Vyasa saw Parikshith’s steadfastness and devotion and changed his mind. He said, “Son, were the mighty miracles of Krishna one or two in number, I could have described them to you. But if one had a billion tongues, and the whole of eternity before him, description of His majesty could never be exhausted. All the Gods bowed before Him with folded hands. Sometimes He would raise His devotees (*bhaktas*) to the skies, but then He would drag them down into the depths.

“Krishna treated the world as a puppet show. He was always radiant with His smile. He never knew anxiety, disappointment, or distress. Sometimes He behaved like a common man, sometimes like an innocent child, at other times like a near kinsman, or an intimate friend, or a masterful monarch. Sometimes He behaved like a playful cowherd boy. He had the capacity and cleverness to play all roles with unique distinction.

“He loved your grandfather, Arjuna, with special fervour. He used to take him with Him, whatever the occasion or place. Why, Arjuna could move about freely even in the inner apartments of the Lord’s residence. The Lord used to play with your grandfather in the Yamuna waters, diving in one place and rising at a distant spot to surprise him, calling on him to do likewise if he could, competing with him in various games, games that defy description and identification. Suddenly, He would take Arjuna to a solitary place and talk with him there on some mysteries. Often, He would discard smooth silken bed and sleep instead with His head on Arjuna’s lap.

“Your grandfather reciprocated that love to the full. Although sometimes they were found angry against each other, talking as if they were enraged, they made up very soon and resumed friendly conversation quickly. My dear son, it can be said that they were human and God (*nara* and Narayana), like the body and the breath. There was no Arjuna without Krishna and no Krishna without Arjuna. There was no secret that your grandfather didn’t share with Krishna or that Krishna didn’t share with your grandfather.

“Which particular episode in their relationship should I tell about? Ask me what you would like to hear, and I shall gladly relate it to you.”