

Chapter 21. The Durvasa Episode

The never-ending food vessel

Vyasa hastened to explain Durvasa's queer laughter. "Durvasa, however, accepted Duryodhana's prayer! He started toward the forest, saying 'Right! I'll do it' In this prayer, there was a deep sinister purpose. It was this: One morning at sunrise, when the Pandavas were worshipping the Sun, the Sun took pity on their condition and, out of His immeasurable grace, gave them a vessel, whose contents would remain undiminished no matter much they were used up. It was called the never-ending plate (*akshaya-pathra*). As the dutiful wife, Droupadi used to take her food only after the five brothers had taken theirs. Before she finished eating, the vessel would be full of food no matter how many ate from it. But when she had finished and cleaned the vessel, it would give no more. Thus, once every day, the vessel was pouring plenty —until she had eaten. Prior to that, she could feed thousands, even millions, from that vessel. But once she had taken her food out of it, it lost its power for the day. That is to say, there would have to be some particle of food in it so that it could be multiplied a millionfold and used. That was its peculiar glory.

"Duryodhana asked Durvasa to approach the Pandavas and demand hospitality after Droupadi had taken her food, for he had this special handicap in mind.

"If the short-tempered sage sought food and the Pandavas were unable to satisfy him and his huge retinue, in the throes of hunger he was certain to invoke a terrible curse, which would destroy the brothers forever. The knotty problem of living with them would be solved, and the Kauravas could rule the entire realm in peace. That was Duryodhana's evil intent.

"But the Pandavas looked for support not to something or someone outside them but to the Lord within them. What could the curse of a sage, however mighty, do to such? With the all-protecting Lord on their side, how could the wiles of evil-minded men harm them? Their conspiracies would fail ignominiously. The wicked Kauravas didn't realise that when they planned in one direction, the Lord planned in another.

Droupadi seeks Krishna's help in satisfying Durvasa

"Durvasa appeared before the Pandavas with his ten thousand disciples just when Droupadi was conversing with her lords, resting after eating and then cleaning the sacred vessel. Dharmaraja saw the sage come toward the leaf-thatched hut where they spent their days. He rose quickly, welcomed him enthusiastically, washed his feet, offered flowers in worship, and fell prostrate before him. He declared, 'Today, I have realised my highest ambition in life; this is indeed a day of supreme luck.' He shed tears of joy and stood with folded hands. His brothers and Droupadi stood by his side, after their prostrations, with heads bent in reverential homage.

"Durvasa, who was visibly tired by the exhaustion of the long journey, spoke with evident exasperation, 'We are going to the river for a bath and noon rituals; please have food ready for me and my ten thousand followers when we return.' After this announcement they moved on quickly to the river.

"When he heard these words, Dharmaraja felt a shock, and his heart nearly stopped. He consulted Droupadi and discovered that the vessel had been cleaned nicely and stored away. They all sank in sorrow, fearing what

might happen to them. ‘Ten thousand to be fed! O God! What does this day have in store for us?’ they lamented, lost in grief.

“For Droupadi, the ideal housewife, the chance to entertain guests with food was a welcome gift. But at this late hour, when so many had to be fed so soon, in the jungle, where no provisions were available, she became desperate. ‘The guest who has landed on us is the celebrated Durvasa, whose attainments and capabilities are known all over the world. By a mere thought, he can turn those who anger him into ashes! Alas, what terrible calamity awaits my lords,’ she wondered and shivered in fear.

“She couldn’t decide on any plan to feed the horde that had descended on her. Who else could help her out other than the Lord, the saviour of the good, Krishna. ‘O, Gopala! Save my lords. Guard us from the destruction that threatens us. Show us how to satisfy these ascetics and this sage.’ She called upon Krishna, with tears streaming from her eyes and with anguish gnawing at her heart. She pleaded yearningly with the Lord. She didn’t care what was in store for her, but she prayed that her husbands be saved and that her married status be retained intact. She wept aloud, in irrepressible grief.

“The Pandava brothers heard the wail, and their agony was doubled. They also prayed to Krishna, their only refuge. ‘O Nandananda, you rescued us from calamity after calamity designed by the Kauravas. You guarded us as the eyelids guard the eye. Why have you plunged us into this awful distress today? Pardon our sins and faults. Save us from this dire peril. Help us to satisfy the sage and his huge retinue.’

Krishna to the rescue by relieving the guests’ hunger

“The Pandavas’ prayers and Droupadi’s tears softened the heart of Krishna, at Mathura, and moved Him from there. Footfalls were heard. The Pandavas, whose heads were bent with anxiety about Durvasa returning from the river, raised their eyes and saw Krishna entering their hut, scattering brightness with His smile, His yellow robe trailing along the ground.

“They exclaimed, ‘Krishna! Krishna!’ and ran toward the Lord.

“Droupadi heard his voice and hurried out of the inner apartment; she surmised it must be some sign of the grace of God that might be showered on them. But when she saw Krishna, she hastened to fall at His feet and wash them with her tears. ‘Save me, save my happiness, satisfy the sage and his followers.’

“Krishna, the consummate director of this universe drama, appeared unconcerned with their anxieties and immersed only in His own hunger! ‘Droupadi! This is strange, I’m hungry. First appease My hunger; then you can ask Me what you need. Give Me a little food, immediately!’ He put out His palm, as if He couldn’t wait.

“Droupadi said, ‘O Lord! This isn’t the occasion for fun; this is a testing time for us. Save us, don’t laugh at our plight.’ She wiped the flow of tears with the border of her sari. She prayed, both hands extended in supplication.

“Krishna lifted up her head with His hand and said in soft assuring tones, ‘Child! Tears collect in the eyes of women at the slightest provocation. But can My hunger be appeased by tears?’ Evidently, Krishna was in a sarcastic mood.

Droupadi replied, ‘Gopala! You’re the second supplicant at our door today. If we don’t give you what you ask, you won’t curse us and bring destruction on us. But the other supplicant is waiting with ten thousand follow-

ers to appease his hunger by a dinner from us! We're all about to be reduced to ashes —where can we get even a single grain in this forest? How can I appease the hunger of so many people at such short notice, in this desolate place.' She explained the reason for the gloom that had overtaken them.

“Gopala laughed aloud. ‘You say ten thousand guests have come but I don't see a single one here! I can only laugh at your words. You're throwing away the child on your hip to fondle the children who are afar. First give Me enough for My hunger; then you can think of satisfying people who are far away.’ Krishna was adamant that He be attended to first; He acted the part of a hungry person so perfectly.

“Droupadi explained her predicament. ‘Lord, the vessel had a variety of food. They were all served and finished, and I took my food last. I cleaned the sacred vessel gifted by the Sun and stored it away. How can I get food from it now? How can I appease Your hunger? You are our only refuge. If You, who know everything, cause us suffering, what shall we say of others?’ Droupadi wept again.

“Gopala said, ‘Well, bring the vessel here. If I get even a particle of something edible, I'll be content.’ So, she went in, got the vessel, and placed it in Krishna's hands.

“Gopala passed His fingers carefully inside the vessel, seeking some particle that might have escaped the scraping and washing. He found in the ‘neck’ of the vessel a fraction of a cooked leaf. So He asked ‘Droupadi! You seem to have had a leafy dish for lunch today!’

“Droupadi was surprised that Krishna had discovered a fraction of a leaf in the vessel she had scrubbed so clean. ‘This must be your miracle; whatever work I do, I do efficiently. I couldn't have scrubbed it so shabbily,’ she laughed.

“Krishna showed her the leaf, saying, ‘Look! I got this from your vessel. This is enough to appease not only My hunger but the hunger of all beings in the universe.’ He put it on His tongue with the end of His finger and, swallowing, exclaimed, ‘How nice! My hunger is gone!’

“At that very moment, Durvasa on the river bank and his ten thousand disciples felt their stomachs overfull with food. They experienced supreme happiness, free from the pangs of hunger they suffered a minute before. They communicated their wonder to each other in gestures and then in words. ‘Our stomachs are too full already. There is no space in them for even an additional grain of rice! Dharmaraja will be waiting for us with a heavy banquet of extra-delicious dishes, and he'll insist on our doing full justice to his hospitality. But we don't have the space for the feast he has prepared! We are indeed in a terrible fix!’

Satisfied Durvasa blesses the Pandavas

“Someone then remembered the incident when their master, Durvasa cursed Ambarisha and suffered discomfiture at the hands of the very victim of his curse, through the intercession of Krishna. They reported their condition and their surmise to Durvasa. The sage, who became aware of the grace that was won by Dharmaraja, blessed him profusely. He left the place with his disciples by another route, avoiding the Pandava's residence.

“But Krishna had commissioned Bhima to go to the river and bring the sage and his retinue quickly for lunch. When Bhima saw them getting away through another route, he walked quicker, and the disciples, afraid of his intentions, ran into the jungle to save themselves.

“Bhima confronted Durvasa. ‘Master! My elder brother ordered me to get you; lunch is ready for all of you.’

“Durvasa pleaded inability. ‘Bhima! We can’t eat fraction of a mouthful. We’re full to the bursting point. We aren’t displeased with you. I bless you, that you may attain every happiness. I’ll come to you when you are ruling the world as undisputed sovereigns. and I’ll receive your hospitality then. Those who sent me to you with sinful motives will meet with total destruction.’ Wishing them the best of luck, Durvasa left, with his followers.

“Parikshith! Did you notice that your grandfathers’ devotion and sense of surrender had nothing to equal them? So also, the grace that Krishna showered upon them was unexcelled.”

While Vyasa was revealing these incidents to show Parikshith the Pandavas’ faith and Krishna’s grace, Parikshith listened intently, with awe and reverence, wonder and anxiety alternately affecting his mind. When the Pandavas dilemma was described, Parikshith was agitated; when some impending calamity was described, he shed tears of sympathy, when success was described, he shed tears of joy.