Introducing Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata

Bibudhendra Narayan Patnaik
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FOR

My second uncle, Surya Narayan Patnaik, who introduced me to the delightful world of the canonical puranas when I was barely six years old,

My youngest aunt, Arnapurna Patnaik, a fascinating story teller, who told me stories from Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata when I was about ten years old,

And

My mother, Hemalata Patnaik, who never told me a story because she did not know how to tell a story. She fondly hoped that I would tell her Krishna kathas in her old age. It did not happen.

They are no more.

As I proceed to introduce Sarala’s Vishnu Purana, which is how he described his Mahaabhaarata, I seek their blessings.
Sarala’s *Mahaabhaarata* is a truly wonderful retelling in verse in Odia of the classical Mahabharata story. This remarkably creative storyteller conceptualised parts of the great narrative differently; as a result, among others, some of his characters do not resemble their counterparts in the canonical version. Sakuni is one. Gandhari is another. Similarly there are numerous episodes in his retelling which have no correspondence in Vyasa – the canonical Mahabharata. Duryodhana’s crossing of the river of blood, the ripening of the mango of truth, and the worship of Krishna in the form of Nilamadhaba after his passing away are just three of the many. Some episodes take a different form; for instance, the archery test which Arjuna won, Draupadi’s disrobing and Aswasthama’s revenge. Unlike in the classical narrative in which the Pandavas did not know that he was their brother when Karna was alive, it was no secret to anyone in this narrative - everyone in *Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata* knew who he was ever since his childhood. And Sarala’s Krishna is not the same as the Krishna in the classical version; the two differ in many ways including the extent of the avatara’s involvement in human affairs, which shows that Sarala had a somewhat different understanding of the nature of divine intervention. These apart, Sarala has given us a purer story; much of the deliberations of a philosophical nature, whether on statecraft or the duty of a king or on virtuous living, in Vyasa Mahabharata are not to be found in Sarala’s retelling.

*Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata* is said to be the first complete retelling by any one poet of the canonical text in an Indian language. This monumental work has not been rendered into English. It has not been rendered into any Indian language either with the exception of Bengali, but it seems only a part of this rendering that dates back to the sixteenth century is available now. I have not attempted to provide a translation of this great composition here. All I have tried to do is quite humble; I have tried to give a flavour of it to those who do not know or cannot read Odia. I have only presented some episodes in English which bring out Sarala’s visualization of the ancient story and his “localization” (used here in the non-technical sense of giving the original non-local a local colouring) of bits of it. My remarks and observations are more or less in the style of a purana pathaka (one who does purana patha) in a purana patha, a traditional religious practice of reciting and explaining a purana, which is still to be found in some temples and *bhagabata gharas* (one-roomed houses in villages where the sacred text, Srimad Bhagavata, is kept and worshipped and occasionally
recited as ritual to whosoever cares to listen) in many places in Odisha, especially in the small towns and villages. These remarks and observations, consonant with the spirit of the narrative, aim to provide some organization to the presentation of the stories chosen almost randomly. Besides, when one tells another’s story with some involvement, one feels almost compelled to add a bit of one’s own thinking about aspects of it in some form: comments, observations, interpretations and the like. It is especially so when the story is as comprehensive and as profound as Mahabharata and is also one with which one has grown up and which has become a significant part of one’s cultural identity. In a word, I have tried to retell bits of Sarala’s magnum opus, following the ancient retelling tradition of our eternal narratives: the Ramayana and the Mahabharata.

My telling of the stories of Sarala is not linear. This apart, sometimes I have presented a story at two or three places, a bit of it here and a bit elsewhere, highlighting some aspect of it at one place, and some at another. And Sarala’s stories and my ruminations on them are kind of mixed up in the presentation. One will have no problems, I believe, in figuring out the broad outlines of Sarala’s narrative, and enjoying his incredible creativity. One who is familiar with at least the main episodes of Vyasa Mahabharata would have a better understanding of Sarala’s retelling.

The stories presented here are arranged in five essays. As already mentioned, the only aim of this effort is to introduce Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata to those who are unfamiliar with it and it is this that connects these apparently unconnected essays, which can indeed be read independently.

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THE FIRST ESSAY

Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata is the first Odia retelling of the ancient story by the fifteenth century Odia poet, Sarala Das, renowned as the aadikavi (the first poet, but really the first renowned poet) of Odia literature. No retelling by a creative storyteller is a carbon copy of the original. And Sarala’s is not. The celebrated Odia poet re-conceptualized Mahabharata and composed a truly wonderful story.

The story of Mahabharata can be viewed from many perspectives. From one perspective, it is essentially a revenge story. Now how is the revenge worked out in Sarala’s version?

In a structural sense, central to this narrative is a terrible war, in which huge armies fought, and at the end of which were just thirteen people alive, including Aswasthama, who was protected by the boon of immortality, and Krishna, who needed no protection. Bhishma, who death could claim only when he so desired, was lying wounded, waiting for the auspicious time to arrive so that he could die. And this war was the ultimate consequence of the overpowering desire for revenge in quite a few characters in the narrative. Prominent among them were the following: Gandhari, Dhritaraashtra, Bhima, Arjuna, Jayadratha, Draupadi,
Amba, Kunti, and Drona, Drupada and Aswasthama. The list is long. And then there were the special cases of Duryodhana and Sakuni. The former took revenge on an unsuspecting Gandharasena, his maternal grandfather, in the most sickening way for a perceived wrong he had done his father Dhritarashtra, and in return, Sakuni, Gandharasena’s eldest son, committed himself to avenge his family’s and relatives’ death. Duryodhana’s, especially his, and Sakuni’s acts of revenge were the foulest of all because these were accomplished through treachery, unlike the rest. Among the revenge seekers one might include Krishna, or one might not, depending on how seriously one wishes to take what he once – just once – said, namely that he got the Kauravas killed by the Pandavas because he had felt humiliated in Duryodhana’s court. There is no evidence at all in the narrative in terms of his thoughts or words or action to provide support to this statement of his. In Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata Krishna’s explanations, whenever he cared to provide them, are like that. It is others who put their own construction on what he said or did. He had indeed used Bhima to get Jarasandha killed, but it was not at all motivated by revenge. In any case, in this narrative of revenge, Bhishma, Yudhisthira, and arguably Karna were the only ones among the prominent figures who were unaffected by this destructive passion.

And revenge is often the outcome of envy, jealousy, intolerance, irrationality, suspicion, fear, anger, hurt ego, and hatred. Gandhari and Kunti were jealous of each other, as were Draupadi and Bhima’s asura (demon) wife Hidimbaka. Draupadi was more strongly bonded to Duryodhana and his brothers by hatred than by kinship. Her father, Drupada, hated Drona for the humiliation he had received from him. And Drona’s humiliation of the king, who once was his friend, was itself an act of revenge for Drupada’s humiliation of him in full view of his court earlier. Duryodhana developed, quite irrationally, a blind hatred for his maternal grandfather Gandharasena and his family; Bhishma was afraid of Amba, and Amba felt terribly wronged by him. Gandhari and Kunti disliked each other. And it goes on and on.

Here we consider only a few of these revenge stories, which bring out Sarala’s inventiveness in his retelling of the ancient story. We begin with Amba’s. Her elder sisters were already married into the Kuru family; they had married Bhishma’s elder brothers, Chitravirya and Bichitravirya. So Bhishma, who had played no role at all in his brothers’ marriages, unlike in the canonical story, sent word to her father, king Padmanabha that he should give his remaining daughter in marriage to him. Padmanabha got this message in the
middle of the swayambara he had organized for Amba. The assembled kings were so frightened of Bhishma that they all left the swayambara.

But still Bhishma could not marry the girl. On the eve of his ritual journey to her place for the wedding, even without Padmanabha’s invitation, he got to know about his mother Ganga’s curse on his father Santanu. She had cursed him to die in the hands Bhishma’s son. He immediately discarded his wedding dress, and took a vow that he would never marry and be the cause of his noble father’s death. Now Amba’s father, despite being worried on Bhishma’s account, did not accede to his proposal. Instead, he invited king Salu, who had shown interest in her earlier, to marry his daughter. He of course did not inform him about the great Kuru’s proposal. Salu accepted the invitation and was already on his way to the bride’s place when he heard about the failed swayambara. He was so scared of Bhishma that he returned home. Now no prince would agree to marry Amba and invite the great warrior’s ire. Now Sarala’s Bhishma was not arrogant or hot headed in the least. He was firm in his resolve, but it was entirely unproblematic because he was reasonable and conscientious. Once he had decided not to marry, he would surely not have stood on the way of Amba’s wedding. Nothing at all in Sarala’s story even remotely suggests that he would have. But every prince was in the grip of a totally irrational fear of Bhishma.

Thus one day Padmanabha came with Amba to Bhishma’s presence and complained about the way he had complicated Amba’s life. Bhishma said that he was helpless on that matter and that he hadn’t rejected Amba for someone else. Padmanabha then went to each Kuru elder: Santanu, Bhurisrava, and Pareswara (Parashara, in many versions). They all tried to persuade Bhishma to marry the girl, but he wouldn’t budge. The distressed father left Amba in Bhishma’s palace, asking her to serve him. He might be pleased with her some day if she served him well, he told her, and left. The father also made it abundantly clear to his daughter that he wouldn’t be concerned in the least with whatever Bhishma would do to her or whatever happened to her.

The poor fifteen year old worked day and night in his palace. Bhishma was young and she was stunningly beautiful, but there is not even one hint in the text that she ever tried to tempt him. If she had developed any attachment towards him, nothing in her behaviour showed it. One day the generally reasonable and considerate Bhishma lost his cool and did something
completely unexpected of him and totally unacceptable, if not unintelligible, to others. There is not another example of such unjust behaviour from him in the entire Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata. Most rudely he ordered Amba to leave the kingdom, and directed his attendants to drag her out of his palace. When she protested, he told her that he was afraid of her. Instead of locating the cause of his disquiet within himself and dealing with it, he, most irrationally and unfairly, located it in Amba. Hurt and humiliated, the helpless girl threatened him that she would drown herself in the sacred Ganga with the wish that she would be the cause of his death. This was what she eventually did (Aadi Parva I, 68: 67).

Before that Pareswara had interceded with Bhishma on her behalf. He had even come up with a solution. His suggestion was that he had sex with her but control himself so as not to impregnate her. Bhishma rejected it as being unethical. Then his brother, Parsurama, setting aside the matter of how they were brothers, had gone to the extent of fighting with him for her sake, and the consequences would have been disastrous for him had Santanu and Pareswara not stopped Bhishma from dealing him a lethal blow.

Amba held Bhishma entirely responsible for ruining her life and she wanted to take revenge. But she knew that it was simply beyond her; Bhishma was just too powerful. So she chose to end her life in a ritual manner in order to enable herself for revenge in her next birth. Arguably she was not quite fair to him; she did not fully appreciate his constraints and his apprehensions, but at the same time, the fifteen year old, ordinary woman who had undergone a great deal of totally undeserved mental and physical agony, could hardly have the sense of fair play and discrimination to see Bhishma’s role in her life from a perspective that was sympathetic and more understanding towards him. In any case, he had indeed been very rude to her, and his treatment of her was unquestionably unjust. Even the view, that such behaviour merely showed his lack of self-confidence, sense of insecurity and helplessness in that specific situation, and not his disrespect for Amba, does not absolve him of what he did to Amba. He did not try to explain his point of view to her; he did not probably want to, whatever his reasons. But one thing is clear; it was not due to arrogance. He was not an arrogant man.

If at all, what might absolve him, at least partially, is that he did not ever blame her for her hatred towards him, and her revengefulness. Perhaps he thought that she was justified. He
knew, as did the female-turned-male, Sikhandi, Amba in his (but for Bhishma, “her”) previous birth, that he would be the cause of his fall. The part of the script that the great Kaurava probably did not know was the way he would fall - he did not know that as Sikhandi’s arrows coming from Arjuna’s chariot would hit him, he would be sexually overwhelmed and lose control over himself and would eventually fall. As a young man he was afraid of Amba’s beauty and of himself on that account, and now a birth after, as Sikhandi, she won him, as it were, in the way a woman would, her man. And of all places, in the battlefield! Bhishma did not fight Sikhandi; for him, he was Amba. He did not defend himself. His stated explanation was that he considered it unethical to fight a woman. But one might be tempted to read another explanation hidden under the surface; he was killing himself as though he wanted to compensate her for having killed herself for him in her earlier existence. He let her have her revenge and folded up that story – no more rebirths for them for the revenge to be executed. Incidentally, unlike his listener or reader who would tend to be judgemental about them, Sarala did not adopt such an attitude towards either Amba or Bhishma as he narrated their poignant story: many of his characters knew that Amba would be the cause of Bhishma’s fall, but none of them ever said anything even mildly derogatory about either of them.

As for Sakuni, considered the most vicious villain in the canonical narrative, he is more a victim of circumstances than a villain in Sarala’s retelling. He was under his family’s obligation to take revenge on the mighty Duryodhana. And if an act of revenge is not rejected outright as unjustified in principle (as it is not in the narrative), then Sakuni’s act of revenge is certainly not without justification. If Bhima’s revenge on Duryodhana and Dussasana was justified, as Krishna always maintained, much more so would be Sakuni’s. He resorted to treachery, but that is often the only weapon the weak has to fight an enormously more powerful adversary. This in fact is the stuff of many folktales – in order to deal with a powerful and wicked adversary, the weak is entirely justified in resorting to deceit.

Sakuni did not have to do what the helpless Amba had done in order to avenge the injustice done to her by a supremely powerful person; he did not carry the story forward to another birth. Sarala’s sympathy for the unfortunate Sakuni receives a clear expression when he puts him on the same pedestal as Bhishma, Drona and Salya; they attained the same state after their death. In swarga, the abode of the gods, Yudhisthira saw them all transformed into stars.
Sakuni’s story in brief is this: Duryodhana used to humiliate the Pandavas by addressing them in the Kaurava court as, not “Pandu’s son”, but as “son of Dharma”, “son of Pavana”, “son of Indra”, etc. “Have your seat, O the son of Dharma”, he would tell Yudhisthira. Bhima used to feel hurt, but his brothers didn’t seem to mind, and his mother rebuked him for being quarrelsome. Bhima felt bad because that manner of address highlighted the fact that they were born out of wedlock. One day Krishna told him to respond to Duryodhana’s address by calling him “golaka putra” (the son of (the tree called) saahaadaa). When Bhima did so in the court, Bhishma and Bhurisrava laughed aloud wondering how he knew about it. Duryodhana felt humiliated and asked his mother about what those words meant, clearly anxious that he would discover that he too was born out of wedlock. His mother chided him for addressing the Pandavas the way he did. Then she told him about her marriage.

She had to be ritually married to a saahaadaa tree before she married Dhritarashtra because she was born under some malignant star on account of which her groom was doomed to die before the wedding could take place. The tree died when she was married to it, and with that, the malignant effect wore off. Thus technically Gandhari was a widow when she married Dhritarashtra. At that time a widow was not allowed to marry, although she could beget a child from an outsider through the provision of niyoga. If god Dharma’s son could be known as Pandu’s son, then Dhritarashtra’s son might as well be called the son of (the) saahaadaa (tree), i.e., golaka putra. In fact, the matter was more complicated, a point Krishna had probably ignored; from a different point of view, being Dhritarastra’s son was like being the son of a widow who had not been formally allowed to beget a child. In any case, either way there was, then, no difference between the lineages of Pandu and Dhritarashtra. Now Duryodhana’s assertion about his own clean lineage turned out to be false. He held his maternal grandfather responsible for this. He blamed him for marrying his widowed daughter to Dhritarashtra. He had to pay for it.

He could not have attacked him and defeated him; his father was the king at that time, and he would never have gone to war with king Gandharasena. So he used the foulest treachery against his maternal grandfather. He invited him to their kingdom, and setting aside many details, locked him, his sons, and his relatives - nearly two hundred people - in a cave and increasingly reduced the quantum of food supplied to them. The day came when he provided
just one plateful of rice. Gandharasena had planned his revenge. He had chosen his eldest son Sakuni for the task. He was chosen to live. Others had to make their sacrifice in terms of food so that he lived, and when the supply of food stopped, Sakuni, the only person alive then, had to survive on the dry crumbs of rice pasted on the wall. Gandharasena had chalked out the programme of revenge in detail: Sakuni would ensure that the Pandavas were provoked to the extreme against Duryodhana. He would play with Yudhisthira with the special dice made out of his bones and defeat him, and deprive him of his wealth. He would create conditions for the disrobing of his wife in the court. He would finally ensure the destruction of the Kauravas in a war against the Pandavas. But after that he must not live, because however justified the revenge might be, he must not live after being the cause of the destruction of his own nephews. This was the script given to Sakuni by his father, and he executed it to its last detail.

It was the working of destiny that Sakuni was set free by Duryodhana, who was so impressed with him that he made him his most trusted and most powerful minister. His uncle Sakuni was the knower of the past, the present, and the future, he would say of him, and it was to him that he would turn at every juncture in the course of his dealings with the Pandavas. His father, his wife and even his mother who was Sakuni’s sister, had warned him repeatedly that he would set him on the path of his complete destruction in order to avenge his father’s death, but Duryodhana listened to none. Not for once did he suspect his uncle. For the comprehensive destruction that the Kurukshetra war brought about, it is Duryodhana, more than Sakuni, who is blamed in Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata. One must not declare the weaknesses of one’s own family in public, his mother had said, after she had told him about her marriage to the saahaadaa tree, etc. Weren’t the Pandavas his brothers, the displeased mother had asked him. Now, as for the viciousness and the brutality of what Duryodhana had done to his maternal grandfather, his family and friends, there are hardly any parallels in Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata, One might think that even Bhima’s savage dismemberment of Dussasana looks pale in comparison.

Much later in the story, in a different context, Krishna told Gandhari, who just had unsuccessfully tried to destroy Yudhisthira, that the latter could not be killed since dharma was to rule the world. Now for the same purpose Duryodhana was to die because a person who could go to such a barbaric extent to take revenge must not be allowed to rule. It was as
though the cosmic forces had decided the issue of succession to the throne of Hastinapura against Duryodhana.

In the episode on the killing of Abhimanyu, Sarala provided an interesting dimension to the notion of revenge. On that fateful day, when this brave, young warrior was killed, Arjuna and his charioteer Krishna were not there in the Kurukshetra battlefield. Away from main battlefield, Arjuna was fighting a mlecha king called Jalandhara, who was Duryodhana’s friend. In Sarala’s narrative, removing Arjuna from the Kuruksetra battlefield was actually a design within a design, only that the architects were different. From the perspective of the mortals, it was Duryodhana’s strategy to send Arjuna away to a different battle ground. But killing Abhimanyu was not part of that strategy. From a supra-human perspective, getting Abhimanyu killed and creating the appropriate situation for that to happen, was the young and brilliant warrior’s uncle’s, Krishna’s, plan. It was gods’ wish too, and no mortal knew about it. Krishna had already doomed his nephew; Duryodhana and the others performed only the physical act. Krishna ensured that Jalandhara was killed only after Abhimanyu was. We will say nothing more about this long and interesting episode about Abhimanyu, and the celestials’ plans, etc. – the episode that spanned the mortal and the celestial worlds, and covered the time of Mahabharata and a very distant past, an earlier yuga.

As they were returning to the Pandava camp after killing Jalandhara, Arjuna saw evil omens on the way and was disturbed. Krishna said nothing. When Arjuna heard of his son’s death, he was inconsolable. He blamed his brothers for his death. When he was a bit composed, he wanted to know who had killed his son. He would kill him the following day. Bhima named Jayadratha. He did not allow any of the Pandava brothers to reach Abhimanyu and offer assistance to him, therefore in Bhima’s logic, he was the one really responsible for his death rather than those who actually killed him – the causer agent was adjudged the guilty one, not the agents.
Krishna did not approve of Arjuna’s blaming his brothers for Abhimanyu’s death. Stretching the domain of explanation of life and death to existence beyond death, he dealt with the impermanence of the body: someone would die earlier, someone else later. Therefore it was unwise to blame anyone for a death. He also told Arjuna about the permanence of the soul: it assumes a different form after discarding its mortal body. Using the metaphor of life in the world as a resting place during a journey, he said the tired traveller would take some rest there, like many others like him, and then each would go his way, each a stranger to the other: *jesaneke pathuki parabaase yekaa bisraama karai l jane jane yekaa kehi kaahaara nuhai* (Like a traveller rests in an alien place alone, each one is alone, and no one is anyone else’s) (*Drona Parva*, 141: 122). A wonderful metaphor that views the journey and the resting place so differently from the way these have commonly been.

Sarala’s discourse on life and death within a cosmic framework might have been an almost spiritually elevating experience for his audience, but in his narrative Krishna’s words fell absolutely flat on Arjuna who was too devastated at that moment to gain any solace or illumination from them. He could not believe that Jayadratha could really stop his brothers from coming to his son’s help, so he concluded that they together had conspired to get his son killed. He would fight them all, he told Krishna.

Then Krishna told him that Abhimanyu had to go to the abode of the gods which had been ravaged by a demon called Udaya Kabandha. Only Abhimanyu would be able to kill him, Brahma had told Indra. So the gods wanted him in their world. At that precise moment he was fighting the demon in the heavens, Krishna told Arjuna, who wanted to see it for himself so that he could believe those words. Eyes cannot lie, words can. So Krishna took him to the *swarga loka*, the land of the celestials where the fight was taking place.

Abhimanyu was fighting fiercely, and Krishna and Arjuna were watching him at some distance from under a tree. When Abhimanyu saw Arjuna, he asked him to move away from the fighting zone. He didn’t want them - for him, two strangers from the mortal world - to be accidentally killed by his arrows. Arjuna was very happy to see his son, and wanted to hold him in his arms. Krishna advised him to understand that Abhimanyu did not even recognize him; he was no more his son. In Sarala’s words: *se tote na cinhai tu kisa taara taata* (he doesn’t recognize you, how then are you his father) (*Drona Parva*, 146: 165).
As the truth dawned on him, Arjuna was highly disappointed. He had showered so much affection on his son right from his childhood, he complained to Krishna, but in barely one day’s time, his son had forgotten it all. Krishna told him about the illusory nature of relations in the mortal world, and wanted him to understand that in the world of the gods these relations from the past were non-existent. If that was how it was in swarga, the abode of the gods, then it would be better to return to the world, he said. Krishna brought him back to the world.

In one thought and in one couplet Arjuna dismissed his experience of an aspect of the reality of life and death that he, as a human being, was privileged to have: arjuna boile hari yesaneka bicaara jebe swarge / niprohi bhubana yeti yethun caala jibaa bege (Arjuna told Hari, if this is how things are in swarga, it’s an unfeeling place, let us go away from here) (Drona Parva, 146: 169). Possibly nowhere else in Saarala Mahaabhaarata is there a more precise and a more powerful statement of the triumph of moha (attachment) and maya (illusion) over jnana, true knowledge – it is in fact a rejection of the life of non-attachment and truth for one of attachment and illusion.

Back in the Pandava camp, he saw Draupadi, Abhimanyu’s mother Subhadra and wife Uttara all crying piteously. The sorrow of his brothers, and the agony of the women affected him as intensely as the news of his son’s death had when first heard it. He repeated the oath he had taken earlier: he would kill the one responsible for Abhimanyu’s death the very next day. The differences between the two pronouncements were in the greater harshness of the utterance, in identifying the target as Jayadratha, rather than his brothers, and in imposing a more restricted time frame for revenge: if by sunset he didn’t succeed in his mission, he would submit himself to fire. Krishna didn’t seem pleased, not because he had reservations about the killing of Jayadratha or the idea of revenge. He was uncomfortable because he knew that it was not going to be easy.

Now this being the case, is it not rather odd, one might wonder, in view of what he had said earlier? When he placed the death of Abhimanyu in the cosmic context, he suggested a perspective on death and the role of human agency in it, which rendered the whole notion of taking revenge rather untenable. How then, back in the mortal world, could he not feel uneasy
with Arjuna’s pledge for revenge? The answer may come from the fact that the two contexts were different. When he articulated the cosmic perspective, Arjuna’s anger was directed against his brothers, and now his target was one from the enemy. Given this fact, there was nothing odd about Krishna’s stand; it was just strategic and political. However, there could be another way of looking at it. Krishna knew it was pointless to talk Arjuna out of revenge. He had taken him to show Abhimanyu in the abode of the gods, and if that experience did not change his perspective, Krishna must have concluded that no arguments and no advice would.

Details of how Arjuna’s redeemed his pledge in the battlefield on the following day are of no interest here; the outlines are more or less the same as in Vyasa Mahabharata, although Sarala’s narrative has a strong element of drama.

On the surface, in this story of revenge, the episode of Arjuna’s visit to the land of the gods appears to be entirely pointless as the narrative did not take a different direction. The father was face to face with the truth about the transitory nature of human relationships, but it had no impact on him. Then did Sarala have this short episode just for the sake of dramatic effect? Is it nothing more than merely ornamental? It may not be so. It is one of those very few episodes in his Mahaabhaarata which questions revenge, which was often raised to the level of a moral duty in the narrative. Even Yudhisthira, the epitome of virtue, did not condemn revenge as such, although both Sakuni and he were deeply concerned about its consequences in certain situations in human terms. Their framework was restricted in that it allowed them to consider an act from the point of view of the here and the now – in its widest sense, this mortal world and the lifetime of the humans as they experience it. Here Sarala constructs a different argument to question the logic and the legitimacy of revenge; he extends the the domains of space and time so as to include the other worlds one has inhabited and will inhabit, and the cosmic time in which one undergoes the karmic cycle. But how does one persuasively present this perspective in a story? Sarala creates a puranic discourse in which one mortal, Arjuna, was able to have an experience of the truth about life and death at that level, although the poet highlights the idea that it was possible because of the grace of the Supreme Lord – only he sees the truth who He shows the truth, as the ancient wisdom elucidates. Now one, who has been privileged to absorb this experience, is a jnani, one who understands the real nature of things, or in another language – Sarala’s favourite - one who
knows the past, the present and the future. Such a person can just not think in terms of revenge. For him it is meaningless. But Arjuna only saw, but did not absorb what he saw.

From another point of view, this episode does not really comment on the nature of relationship in *swarga* as it does on the same in *martya*, the mortal world. The issue is not merely that death puts an end to a relationship. Sarala’s Krishna wanted Arjuna to realize that there are levels to a relationship. At one, one is one’s father’s son, at another, they are different beings who have come into this world to fulfil their respective karmic destinies, and it is on account of moha, illusion, that in the minds of the humans these levels get mixed up, and cloud their perspective.

The atmosphere in which the Kauravas and the Pandavas grew up as children could hardly be said to be one that encouraged goodwill for one another, and discouraged jealousy and revengefulness among them. The relationship between their mothers, Gandhari and Kunti, was not exactly wholesome. In fact, they were not even comfortable in each other’s company. Interestingly, the sage Vyasa played a no small part in fuelling their jealousy. When Yudhisthira was born, the generous Pandu appealed to Vyasa for an issue for his elder brother Dhritarashtra, who was jealous of him (*Aadi Parva* I, 185: 121). It was not destined that Dhritarashtra and Gandhari would have male children, so destiny had to be coaxed or coerced (the distinction between them disappears when a yajna is performed to obtain the desired result) for the purpose. Ignoring details, Durvasa’s mantra and Vyasa’s grace gave them a hundred sons. Soon after the birth of Duryodhana and his brothers, Vyasa went to Pandu, and told him that his brother had got a hundred sons through Durvasa’s grace, who would all become wicked and powerful; so for reasons of the kingdom of Hastinapura, Kunti should have a son from the powerful god Pavana. Vyasa might not have made Pandu anxious or jealous, but it surely made his wife Kunti jealous. If Sarala does not speak disapprovingly of the sage in this context, it is perhaps because he sees Vyasa as playing an important role in bringing about the destruction of the wicked. There is of course a terrible irony in this: he manipulated the destruction of those for whose birth he had forced or cheated destiny.
To be fair to them, Gandhari and Kunti did not encourage each other’s children to be hostile to their cousins as they were growing up together. Gandhari disapproved of Duryodhana’s enmity towards the Pandavas, and Kunti always rebuked Bhima for his hatred for the Kauravas. It was only after the public humiliation of her daughter-in-law, Draupadi, and her sons’ banishment to the forest for long twelve years (and their having to spend another year incognito) that Kunti hardened, and later when the time came, she, unknown to her sons, entreated Krishna to ensure that war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas took place. During the war she thirsted for the Kauravas’ blood as much as Draupadi did. Much later, Yudhisthira charged her of inciting war (Aashramika Parva, 31: 219-220). Similarly it was only after she lost all her sons in the Kurukshetra battlefield that Gandhari became revengeful towards the Pandavas and wanted to kill the eldest Pandava.

In Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata, Draupadi’s family was not the target of revenge of the Kaurava brothers alone. Bhima’s asura (demon) wife Hidimbaka met Draupadi just once, and all they did then was curse each other’s children – that was the only interaction between them in the entire narrative of one lakh and forty thousand couplets. Draupadi cursed Hidimbaka’s son Ghatotkacha that he die in the battlefield without a fight – a disgraceful death for a brave warrior in terms of the war-related values of those days. In response, Hidimbaka cursed Draupadi’s unborn children to die very young. Very differently from the way he died in the canonical narrative, here in Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata, poor Ghatotkacha died an “accidental” death (not really, because Krishna had contrived things that way, unknown to everyone, details of which we might ignore) when Karna’s divine arrow hit him. He was not Karna’s target. Similarly Draupadi’s children were killed when they were very young, and accidentally, when Aswasthama killed them by mistake. With Draupadi and Hidimbaka in the family, trouble didn’t necessarily have to come to the Pandava family from outside.

Unlike Bhima’s wives, two of Arjuna’s wives stayed in the same household, but Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata does not mention any unpleasant or disgraceful event involving them. Neither does it describe any pleasant interactions between them. It is more likely that they scrupulously avoided each other. The more cynical might explain it all in terms of power equation. Subhadra was, after all, Krishna’s and Balarama’s sister. At the same time Draupadi was not a non-entity either. She was the wife of the one who was Krishna’s greatest
favourite. That apart, she enjoyed Krishna’s affection and protection. As for the incorrigible optimist, he is more likely to account for it in terms of the good relationship between the two women - Draupadi liked, or at least did not dislike, Subhadra, the cultured, ambitionless, and almost submissive woman. In a family gathering after the Mahabharata war was over this quiet woman made a bold assertion to express her disagreement on a certain matter with the Pandavas and Draupadi, and her mother-in-law, Kunti. Each of them was claiming credit, to the exclusion of the rest for the victory in the Kurukshetra war. She said that she indeed was the cause of it – it was to avenge her son Abhimanyu’s death that her brother Krishna ensured the destruction of the Kauravas. Incidentally she was the only one among them all who mentioned Krishna in this connection; at that moment of claiming credit, Krishna was in no one else’s mind, not even Arjuna’s.

These might give us some idea as to how Sarala creatively told the revenge story that the Mahabharata indeed is. At the end of the story, the story of revenge did not end, neither in the canonical version nor in Sarala’s. Yudhisthira’s ascension to heaven draws the curtain on the story of the Pandavas and the Kauravas, but it does not fold up the narrative of revenge - probably because the poet of the Mahabharata had a cyclic conception of the happenings in the world. As the actors return to the mortal world from the other worlds where they had gone after death, the past is re-enacted. Or because the poet saw revenge as a basic flaw in human nature, he envisaged a repetition of the revenge story. During the last phase of their journey to their last destination, god Agni took back from a reluctant Arjuna the divine weapons he had given him. Even at that stage of the journey, the great archer’s attachment to his weapons was as strong as ever. Agni reassured him that those weapons would come back to him – the same situation would obtain again, the mother earth would be burdened again, and Arjuna would be born again to unburden her, and at that time those weapons would come back to him: bhaara nibaarane puna hoibu tu jaata / tohara haate deba ye dhanu sahasranta (You will be born again to reduce the burden of the earth / (we, i.e., the god Agni) will give this bow and the arrows to you again) (Swargaarohana Parva, 49: 79). This comforted Arjuna, but comforting Arjuna was surely not Agni’s intention, at least his sole intention. The god’s words were prophetic; in them we see an emphatic statement of the human condition. At the end of the story, as the characters faded away to the other worlds, what was left behind was the script to be re-enacted in another yuga, another aeon. Was this not essentially what the sage Agasti in Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata had told Kunti? When she asked him how he knew
about Durvasa’s necklace and his mantra, he told her that this was the script he had composed.

_Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata_ is such a long narrative, and one can imagine it must have taken many, many sittings, spread over months, for Sarala to tell the story to his listeners. And these sittings might not have been continuous, and five hundred years after, it is difficult to surmise the time that might have separated any two sittings. Inconsistencies in the narrative are by no means unexpected in such circumstances. Indeed there are quite a few, of which we consider only three below:

In _Aadi Parva_, there is an episode about Kunti’s meeting with Karna when he was a child (246-252). She met him in Hastinapura in Radhebi’s house. On hearing that Gandhari had decided to wear a black cover on her eyes, she had gone to Hastinapura to dissuade her from doing so. Pandu and Madri were in the forest, and Sahadeva was not born yet. She did not know that the infant she had given birth to when she was unmarried and had floated down the stream, was growing up in Radhebi’s house. She was overjoyed and with the children, Yudhisthira, Bhima, Arjuna, and Nakula, she went to see him.

Almost without bitterness, Karna told his mother that he was aware of the circumstances of his birth, of how she had cruelly floated him down the stream and of how Radhebi had picked him from the waters and had looked after him (_Aadi Parva_, 250-251: 50-55). She had given him a name: Radheba. He also told her that Duryodhana and he had become great friends. Kunti introduced her children to them, and asked them to prostrate at their eldest brother’s feet: _ye tumhara jyestha bhraatha atai sama pitaa / muhin tumara atai re garbhadhaari maata_ (This is your eldest brother, who is like your father / I am the mother from whose womb you are born) (_Aadi Parva_, 251: 59-60). When Karna heard that she had named her son Jujesthi (a version of Yudhisthira; both these are Yudhisthira’s names in Sarala’s version), he felt wronged. He interpreted “Jujesthi” to mean “the first born”. It hurt him deeply that his mother named her second child as the firstborn. It did not matter whether the
mother knew if her first child was alive or dead; the firstborn would remain firstborn irrespective of it. To the child Karna, his mother’s denial to him his status as her first born was far greater injustice his mother had done him than floating him down the river. Then and there he declared his hostility to Yudhisthira. He told his mother that he could now get his due as her firstborn only after Yudhisthira’s death. It so happened that Karna did not meet his mother again for a very long time.

Karna’s taking umbrage at his mother’s naming her second born “Jujesthi” might appear to be silly, but on second thought we would understand him better – he was not silly at all, and he did have a point. By giving that name to her second child the mother announced to the world that she did not have any child before him. She could have given him some other name. For instance, she could have named him “Dharma”, a name by which he also came to be known, and a name that made no assertion about whether he was her first child or not. A mother might have had some compulsion in abandoning her child, but if, without any compulsion whatsoever, she did something that amounted to disowning her child even with respect to herself, then the child certainly had reasons to feel wronged.

Shortly before the Kuruksetra war, Kunti went to Karna at Krishna’s instance to get the infallible divine arrows, nila baana and bhuja baana, from him. One of the reasons Karna was invincible was that he had these arrows. She was fully aware that he would pay a very heavy price if he gave these away to her. She did not want this to happen. She wanted to bring him to the Pandavas’ side. But in case he remained unwilling, Sahadeva wanted Kunti to extract a promise from him that he must spare Yudhisthira, Bhima, Nakula and him in the war.

Kunti went to him. He prostrated at her feet. He told her that she must not feel anxious about the safety of the Pandavas because Krishna, the avatar of Narayana himself, was protecting them. Kunti told him that he was her son, and as such he must not fight with his own brothers. Karna was surprised. He wouldn’t believe it: muhin ta na jaanai tuhi mora maata (I do not know that you are my mother) (Udyoga Parva, 364: 113), he told her. Then Kunti told him many details of his birth, including the circumstances that led to his growing up in Radhebi’s house. Karna again prostrated at her feet and said that he had heard bits of those things and that only now did he get to know the entire truth (Udyoga Parva, 369: 179-
In this meeting neither referred to their earlier meeting. They seemed to have forgotten about that meeting, and quite unconvincingly, had the poet Sarala too!

As he was lying in pain and awaiting death, Krishna insisted that Arjuna touched him. He begged for his touch, but Arjuna wouldn’t, having been warned against touching him by his all-knowing brother Sahadeva. Krishna finally persuaded him to extend his bow to him, so that he could touch it at one end, and through that, feel Arjuna’s touch. This Arjuna did, and as soon as he touched the bow, Krishna breathed his last.

One particular text of Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata (not the one under study) mentions that through that touch Krishna withdrew eight of his attributes from Arjuna (Musali Parva, 44: foot note). We need not dwell here on the meaning of this act. It is irrelevant for the present purposes. What is of interest is the consequence of this act. The text under study mentions that after Krishna’s death, Arjuna was no more the great warrior he was. He couldn’t protect Krishna’s women (gopis) from a group of local cowherds, who resisted his arrows with sticks (lathis). With a thousand arrows he couldn’t kill even one of them. Did the Pandava think they were like Bhishma and Drona, the cowherds taunted him: gaude boile paandava hoilu ki baai / bishma drona praayeka manilu ki tuhi (The cowherds said, O Pandava, are you out of your mind / did you take us to be like Bhishma and Drona) (Musali Parva, 67: 32). As the women resigned themselves to their fate, realizing that he was incapable of protecting them, a confused and unbelieving Arjuna was left wondering what had happened to him: krushnara naastike mora bala kene galaa (What happened to my prowess when Krishna departed) (Musali Parva, 67: 34).

Yet in the following, and the last, parva (as a chapter of the Mahabharata narrative is traditionally called) the very same Arjuna fought Yama when he came to take away Suhani, Yudhisthira’s bride, and tied him up and kept him incapacitated during the wedding rituals (Swargaarohana Parva, 23: 259-260)!

In his episode on Bhanumati’s wedding with Duryodhana, the poet refers to their earlier existence as celestials and to the curse which led to their birth in the mortal world. Duryodhana was Pannaga Narayana (Aadi Parva, 364-389). This is how he is mentioned in Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata throughout. Some of the characters even knew that he was the
human form of Pannaga Narayana, although they all might not have been aware of the circumstances leading to his birth as a human. After cursing him, Sudraka Brahma softened a bit and told him that in the world he would not only enjoy great power and prosperity, but would also have his celestial consort with him. His divinity would never be compromised; no one, god or human, including his parents, would be able to receive his obeisance – the receiver would be burnt to ashes: *jaahaaku namaskaara karibu kara toli / debataaa hoile se abasya jiba jali* (Whosoever you do namaskara to folding your hands / (he) would be reduced to ashes, whether human or god) (*Aadi Parva*, 386: 28).

Duryodhana in *Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata* never bowed to anyone, not even to his parents. The text does not make it clear whether he had a selective memory of his past existence, of the curse, and the compensation, and if he was not, then whether the Brahma’s boon worked as an instinct preventing him from unknowingly becoming the cause of others’ destruction. The former is really extremely unlikely. In any case, from the narrative one gets a different impression. One tends to think that he behaved in that unacceptable manner primarily because of his arrogance, which might have been fed sumptuously by others’ telling him that he was a celestial. Never even once was he apologetic about not showing respect to anyone in the customary form.

He had to pay a very heavy price for it. When he was engaged in his decisive fight with Bhima, an enraged Balarama arrived in the battleground all of a sudden. As he was returning from his pilgrimage, unaware of what all had happened in the Kurukshetra war, the sage Narada met him on the way and incited him against the Pandavas, describing the miserable situation of his protégé and pupil, Duryodhana. Balarama came to intervene in the fight on his protégé’s behalf. But he felt insulted when Duryodhana did not bow to him. As his guru he expected to be accorded the respect that was his due from him. In contrast (and not improbably to drive home the contrast to him! With Krishna around nothing is impossible and nothing is unambiguous.), Krishna and the Pandavas prostrated at his feet again and again. He blessed them and left the battlefield (*Gadaa Parva*, 88-89: 48-50). As he was leaving, he told Duryodhana that had he paid him obeisance, he would have killed the Pandavas and given him the kingdom: *aare drijodhana namaskaara karithaantu jebe aaja / niscaye paandavanta maari se raajya dianti...* (Had you done namaskara today (to me), you,
Duryodhana, / I would have certainly killed the Pandavas and given you the kingdom…) (Gaada Parva, 90: 68).

The narrative does not address this inconsistency, let alone resolve it. Let us not even ask how the same Balarama had tolerated his misdemeanor when he was his pupil. Or was there more to the story, which the poet might not have told for whatever reason? In any case, in that critical moment Balarama, like others, looked upon Duryodhana’s action as an example of his sheer arrogance, and sheer bad manners. He punished him by telling him what he had lost. But was Duryodhana really to blame? It does not matter whether he had memory of his past existence or not. One might think that the right action, namely, not bowing to anyone, was built into his system. In Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata, past existence is often invoked in many instances in order that a present event or act, etc. is viewed in the correct perspective. Considered from the larger time frame of his previous and present existences, Duryodhana clearly appears to be a person wronged against. But this is not the inference the narrative leads the listener-reader to draw. If that were the aim, then there would have been redeeming observations on Duryodhana’s behaviour. There just aren’t any.

Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata contains inconsistency of a somewhat different sort that cannot be possibly be accounted for in such terms as the length of the narrative, even gaps between the sittings of the narration, etc. Consider two instances: the conceptualization of Balarama, and that of Arjuna.

In Aadi Parva I, Balarama is conceptualized as the god with snakes on his head: sarpanta maule bahanti deba kaamapaala (The god Kamapala (i.e., Balarama) carries snakes on his head) (362: 47). This is somewhat reminiscent of, although not exactly like, the traditional concept of Shiva – “not exactly like” because traditionally he is not viewed as wearing snakes on his head. In fact this conceptualization of Balarama reflects the iconography of this avatara as he is worshipped in Odisha, either alone as in Dhenkanal, or more commonly, along with Jagannath and Subhadra in many Jagannath temples. The connection between Balarama and Shiva is quite close in the idol of Balarama – from the point of view of the making of murti, idol, it is far more elegant, to have snakes on the head of the murti of Balarama (incomplete, face-prominent rather human-like form) than around his neck. However, Balarama cannot always be identified with Shiva in Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata.
because there is an episode in the text (the “Sandhyabali” episode) where Balarama and Shiva fight, and both had to be pacified by the gods in order that they abandon fighting (*Sabhaa Parva* II, 581- 617). The second line of the same couplet expresses the popular belief about snakes that they live on air: *pabana aahaare se bratanti sarba kaala* (He lives on the food of air always). But it introduces a complication: what is the antecedent of the third person singular pronoun *se*? The context for the couplet is the following: after Krishna and Balarama met the Krupacharya, Aswasthama, the Pandavas and the Kauravas, Krishna went to Kunti’s place for food. What did Balarama do for his food? Where did he eat and what did he eat? Both the context and the relevant rules of pronominal interpretation would select “Kamapala” as the antecedent. But it would then mean that Balarama, and not the snakes on his head, consumed air as food. This would be a questionable view because elsewhere in *Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata* Balarama is said to have the usual food for the humans. This is why here the requirement of number agreement between the pronoun and its antecedent must be ignored, on the ground of poetic license, and *sarpa* (snakes) assigned the antecedenthood of the pronoun *se*. Thus Balarama here is a god with snakes on his head. This view is reinforced in the gods’ prayer to Balarama in *Musali Parva*: *nila bastra pariharana sire saptapheni* ((you wear) blue garments with seven hoods on (your) head) (27: 179). Or does it mean that the seven hoods are part of his physical form? It is unclear in the belief system of *Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata*. In the same prayer the gods described him as the one who holds many universes on his hood: *kotie brahmaanda to phanire karu rakshyaa* (You protect tens of millions of universes on your hood) (28: 185). He is now the great snake, Vasuki, with many, and not seven, hoods, and not the one who carries snakes on his head.

The passing away of Balarama is described in *Musali Parva* (30: 20-27). Krishna’s kith and kin, the Yadavas, had all perished fighting among themselves in a strange upsurge of intense frenzy as the curse of sage Astabakra materialized. After killing the demon Ambasura, Balarama went looking for Krishna, and saw him sitting in an utterly dejected mood. He was unusually quiet. Balarama felt deeply distressed and suddenly felt the urge to give up his body. He was transformed at once into a snake and he rushed towards the ocean of milk, which is the abode of Narayana. This relates Balarama to the great snake-god Ananta, on whom Bhagavan Vishnu lies, engrossed in his *yoga nidraa* - Balarama then is the avatar of the snake Ananta.
Now there is a very different concept of Balarama in Aswamedha Parva, which precedes Musali Parva (15: 105-113). Vishnu, the avataari, told Krishna that he had created Balarama and him from two hairs of his body. When the gods prayed to him to destroy the sinners and thereby relieve the suffering earth of her burden, he felt inclined to oblige. He then looked at his body and uprooted two hairs from it; one white and the other black. When they were born on earth, the white one had taken the form of Balarama, and the black one, Krishna. Balarama is thus an avatar of Vishnu, as is Krishna.

So far we have noted four different conceptualizations of Balarama in Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata: the snake god Ananta on whom Vishnu rests, the great snake Vasuki on whose head rests all space, the god with snakes on his head, and the manifestation of an ansa (fraction) of Vishnu – his avatar. Each cancels out the other, and Sarala has not created a myth in which these different conceptualizations integrate. The listener-reader is left to wonder who indeed was Balarama.

There is a fifth and final conception of Balarama in Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata, to be found in the later part of Musali Parva, which is concerned with Jagannath worship in Nilagiri, which is modern Puri. Here Balarama is unquestionably Shiva. Sarala creates a myth. When Krishna (-Vishnu) declared his intention to be manifest in Nilagiri to receive worship in Kali yuga, Shiva wanted to be with him. So he assumed the form of Balarama: iswara boile aambhe thibum tumbha tule / baladeba rupa tahin iswara dhaile (Iswara – Shiva – said I will be with you / He assumed the form of Baladeba there) (112: 88). Now the creator-god Brahma did not want to be left alone; so he too chose to join them: he took the form of Subhadra. Further details as to why he took the female form, etc. in the Sarala myth of the origin of Jagannath worship in Puri can be set aside for the present. In any case, this Balarama, “Shiva as Balarama”, which is ingrained in the mind of quite a few in Odisha today, is not persuasively grounded (merely mentioned) in Sarala’s grand narrative of the Mahabharata. As Krishna’s brother, Balarama was a different concept altogether. Sarala’s Musali Parva does not tell the story of the Pandavas.

Consider the conceptualization of Arjuna. In the Satya yuga, (aeon of truth) Arjuna, it is said, was Jaya and Bijaya, the gatekeepers of Vishnu, now manifest as Krishna in Dwapara yuga (Aadi Parva I, 237: 24). In the following couplets - 28 to 37 - dealing with the same
idea, Arjuna is identified with Srivatsa, whose footprint Vishnu bears on his chest. In the couplet 38, he is referred to as Prahlada, when Krishna was Narasingha. In the couplet 46, Arjuna is said to be Bharata, and Krishna, Rama. Each of the above shows an affectionate relationship, a loving bond, between Krishna and Arjuna spanning aeons and existences; thus what Sarala has created is a symbol of this beautiful relationship. However, associating him with Jaya and Bijaya (ignoring the important matter of the separate existences of Jaya and Bijaya), Srivatsa, Prahlada, and Bharata does not lead to any intelligible concept. Incidentally, there is no purana or any other similar text that conceptualizes Arjuna like this. This in itself of course constitutes no demerit; what is, is this mixing of myths that leads to incoherence for the sake of a symbol.

One could respond to the above saying that Sarala views Arjuna as an avatara, who took many forms. An avatara is always an “avatara of”; whose avatara was he? That apart, it weakens the concept of avatara. For example, what avataric purpose did Srivatsa serve? Or for that matter, Jaya and Bijaya? Bringing Jaya and Bijaya into Arjuna’s story complicates it a great deal. In Sabhaa Parva II, in the episodes on Sisupala’s previous existence and his killing and the killing of Salu, Jaya and Bijaya are said to be Sisupala and Salu in their last birth in the mortal world, which was due to a curse on them pronounced by the child sage Manu, son of Brahma (321-361, 420-439). Now Arjuna and Sisupala existed in the same world at the same time, but Sarala’s narrative does not relate them in any way.

In Udyoga Parva, reference is made to Bhima and Arjuna as the gatekeepers of Vishnu, but they are not related to Jaya and Bijaya, and it is said that Vishnu, Bhima, Arjuna, Vishnu’s minister Sakuni and the member of his court, Sahadeva, had all taken birth in the mortal world to reduce the burden of the earth (233: 166-167). Whereas there is no problem as such in thinking of Arjuna as a gatekeeper of the abode of Vishnu, in addition to Jaya and Bijaya, he cannot be identified with them and unrelated to them within the scope of the same narrative.

As though the conception of Arjuna is not complicated enough already, in Musali Parva, Sarala introduces yet another complication by associating Arjuna with Sugriva of Ramayana. Arjuna fought Jara after the passing away of Krishna, holding him responsible for Krishna’s death. A voice from the sky asked them to stop fighting. They were close relations, the voice
told them: *aho arjuna ye atai jaraa naame sabara / janme janme thaai ye tumbhara sangara; tuho arjuna sugrivara, srikrushna raamacandra, tumbhara jyestha putra je atai angada* (O Arjuna, this is the sawara named Jara / in births after births he is with you; you, Arjuna, are Sugriva, and Sri Krishna is Ramachandra / this is your eldest son, Angada) (49: 39-40). In Ramayana Angada is Bali’s son, not his brother Sugriva’s. And again, Bharata and Sugriva lived in the same world at the same time, and Arjuna cannot be both Bharata and Sugriva at the same time.

One wishes that Sarala had created a credible story that accommodated these diverse bits in an intelligible manner. Whether it was possible for him in principle to do so is not the question. In fact there can hardly be room for doubt; a purana-maker’s imagination could connect virtually anything with anything. For instance, Arjuna being related to two different people living at the same time may appear unconvincing but it surely would not have posed an insurmountable conceptual problem for the poet. In a different context he created a myth where god Indra existed distributively in the five Pandava brothers, that is, Draupadi married just one person in reality. In sum, the inconsistency in question is the result of the poet’s ignoring the needs of his own narrative. The same can be said about many other inconsistencies in the story as well.

Odisha enters into Sarala’s narrative unobtrusively. And in a way quite naturally too. *Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata* shows how deeply the poet had internalized the story of the Pandavas and the Kauravas. Localization of a narrative is all about the way a narrator experiences and expresses that alien narrative. As for the listeners, they relate to the localized text more intimately; a story that was not theirs becomes theirs. As the local places of pilgrimage, rivers, mountains, items of food, social practices, etc. enter the story, it assumes a new complexion, and little, new myths come into being.

From the classical texts one might have known Puru as the illustrious son of the emperor Yayati and the princess Sarmistha, but in Sarala’s narrative, the mother of Puru was an
odiaani (woman from Odisha) (Aadi Parva I, 10: 15). Her name is not given, neither are any
details about her family or clan. In just one line of a couplet an Odia woman came to be part
of the celebrated Kuru lineage. Then Odisha got connected with Shiva in Sarala’s story. The
incomparable Shiva chose the hills of Kapilasa, near the present day Dhenkanal, as his abode
at a certain point in time, and it was from there that he went to Parvati’s place as the
bridegroom (Madhya Parva II, 1133: 56 ff). The delicacies that Parvati had cooked for him
would gladden an Odia’s heart: aarisaa, khirisaa, gainthaa, jhili, citou pithaa, poda pithaa,
and dhuaa pakhaala, to name a few. Some of these are traditionally connected with certain
Odia festivals. There is a festival (citou amaavaasyaa) in which citou pitha (a kind of cake) is
prepared in every household; there is another in which gainthaa (baula amaavaasya) is
prepared and is offered with milk to the household deity, and to the baula tree. Poda pithaa
(a kind of cake baked in a certain way) is given a special status in Lakshmi Purana, a tale that
celebrates goddess Lakshmi, who served this cake on a particular occasion to her consort
Jagannatha and his elder brother Balabhadra, as the last item of their meal. And pakhaala
(rice water) is generally known as the poor man’s staple in Odisha, but is actually more or
less a routine, and at the same time, a welcome, dish in every Odia household, and many
would view it as an identity marker for an Odia. Then like any Odia having a holy dip in a
river or the sea, etc. on the full moon day of the holy month of Kartika, Bhishma and
Kuntibhoja, Kunti’s father, had a dip in the river Ganga on that same auspicious day. Sarala
calls the ritual bathing of that day akaamaabai snaana (akaamaabai ritual bath), and the
word, akaamaabai, is Odia. Uttering a couplet, which begins with akaamaabai, people still
float boats on this day made of banana trunk in rivers, tanks, ponds or the sea, whatever is
nearby. Again as the Pandavas were about to embark on the last journey of their life, the sage
Durvasa met them at Brahma’s instance to take their weapons from them (ignore that
elsewhere in the narrative it was god Agni who collected the weapons). At that stage of their
life, their weapons had become unnecessary for them, so Brahma wanted them to give them
up (Swargaarohana Parva, 48: 60-61). Now where was the sage going with those weapons?
Not to Kailasha or Kashi, but to Kapilasa!

It was in the vicinity of Kapilasa that Arjuna encountered Shiva and Parvati, who were in
the guise of forest dwellers. When he saw them, Shiva was comfortably lying on Parvati’s
lap, and she was taking out lice from his matted hair (Madhya Parva I, 28: 10). Even today
one could see a woman taking out lice from her husband’s (or a woman relative’s or friend’s)
hair (in lazy winter afternoons) in many cottages of the poor in rural Odisha. In Sarala’s narrative with its distinctive folk atmosphere, the great gods were not gloriously remote from the ordinary people; they were almost like their next-door neighbours! In order to inform Arjuna about the excessive generosity of her consort Shiva, Parvati narrated an incident involving an Odia brahmin boy, named Nirmala. He was no devotee of Shiva, and did not really worship him. All he did was put stones on a shiva linga. Stones, and that too stones picked up from just anywhere, have never been the saamagri (the proper material) with which to worship Shiva. One day as he was eating, he suddenly remembered that he hadn’t put a stone on the linga that day, and he rushed to do so without even washing his hand. But nothing of this displeased the ever-generous and the over-generous god. On the contrary, he was mighty pleased with the boy, and that very day he granted him a boon. The boy asked for a piece of land to till, and this is the little myth that Sarala created to explain how brahmins in Odisha gave up studying the Vedas and took to farming (Madhya Parva I, 32: 55ff).

In *Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata*, the names of many characters were changed in order that they sounded colloquial Odia. Thus Vaamana (Vamana) in *Vaamana avataara* became Baabana; Yudhisthira, Jujesthi; Duryodhana, Drijodhana; Salva, Saalu; Paraashara, Paareswara; Agastya, Agasti; Hidimbaa, Hidimbaki; and Parshuraam, Pasuraama, to cite a few instances. The list is long. Nakula was Odianized as he acquired the surname “Jena”; thus he became “Nakula Kumara Jena”. “Jena” is now a surname of the people whose ancestors belonged to the fighter class at least in coastal Odisha.

In Sarala’s narrative, Odisha was an exceptionally sacred place, and a great favourite of the gods. If Shiva chose the hills of Kapilasa as his abode after the completion of his penance, Vishnu chose a settlement in Odisha to manifest himself as Yamana. He introduced himself to the asura king Bali saying that he belonged to a brahmin family from a brahmin settlement called Barahi near the sacred river Baitarani. His father’s name, he said, was Niranjana Dharmadasa Panda, and his name was Babana Panda (*Udyoga Parva*, 150: 408-411). And finally, Krishna came to be worshipped as Jagannatha in Nilachala (Puri of today). In *Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata* there are some short new narratives that could have developed into ksetra or tirtha mahaatyams – sthala puranas – but somehow this does not appear to have happened.
Yudhisthira once told his uncle Sakuni that during his vanavasa (living in forest) he had visited holy places from *arka tirtha*, i.e., modern Konarak in Odisha, to the Himalayas: *gali maamu arka tirthun himagiri jaaye* (I travelled, Uncle, from Arka tirtha to Himagiri) (*Udyoga Parva*, 232: 153). After handing over the kingdom to his grandson, Pariksita, Yudhisthira went on pilgrimage with his brothers and wife Draupadi in order to do penance – for *hatyaa bimochana* (mukti or release from the sin of killing), as Sarala put it – having committed the sin of killing his brothers. And they came to Odisha! They stayed in a village named Dharmapura near the township of modern Jajapura on the banks of the river Baitarani (*Swargaarohana Parva*, 12: 128-131). Here Yudhisthira married the daughter of Hari Sahu, a trader, who lived in the nearby village called Amaravati, and interrupting their pilgrimage, the Pandavas stayed there for thirty-five years (*Swargaarohana Parva*, 30: 2). Then as the Pandavas and Draupadi resumed their pilgrimage, Yudhisthira’s Odia wife Suhani went to Kapilasa on her husband’s advice to devote herself to the worship of Shiva.

The Pandavas went south of Jajapura and went to *ekaambara tirtha* (the place of pilgrimage called Ekambara), which corresponds to the present day Bhubaneswar. They had a ritual bath in Bindusagara, and had darshan of Mahadeva (Shiva). Then they went to another *tirtha*, near the river Prachi, where, as Yudhisthira worshipped Madhava (Vishnu in the idol form), Bhima was busy fighting the asura, Aredeka, who was going to attack Yudhithira. In another version of the text, the Pandavas went to Sri Nilakandara (present day Puri), where they had their ritual bath in the sea and had darshan of Daru Brahma (Brahman (The Ultimate Being, and not the creator god Brahma of the trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Maheswara) in the form of Wood) – Narayana in four Forms: *samudre sraahaana saari dekhile darubrahma / caturdhaa rupe tahin bijaye naaraayana* (“After bathing in the sea, (they) saw Daru Brahman / Narayana manifest in four forms there” (*Swargaarohana Parva*, 207: 1489). The Odia Hari Sahu was the first person who heard the story of Mahabharata from one who was part of the Mahabharata world; in the version of *Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata* under reference, Sahadeva read out a shortened version of Mahabharata to Yudhisthira’s Odia father-in-law, in the presence of others, including Yudhisthira himself: *bho deba sabadhaane he dharmasuta suna / ye se aadya parva se aambahara bansa guna* (O lord, son of Dharma, listen carefully / this is the Adya Parva of the story of our dynasty) (*Swargaarohana Parva*, 103: 30). This brings to mind Rama’s children, Lava and Kusha, reciting Ramayana to the audience of Ayodhya in the presence of Rama himself.
With Sarala began, in Odia language, the long and distinguished tradition of the long narrative in verse in the form of purana. Sarala composed Candi Puraana, and Bilanka Raamaayana in addition to Mahaabhaarata. Many puranas, upapuranas, and mahatmyas (it would not be misleading to broadly characterize the last two as short narratives with religious themes) were written subsequently, including Srimad Bhaagavata. To even the most casual reader of Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata it would be quite obvious that the poet did not translate the classical narrative; he retold it, thereby allowing himself considerable freedom, and in that process of re-creation, he actually created a text that resembled and yet not resembled Vyasa’s Mahabharata. Subsequent writers of purana followed his approach – some, like Jagannatha Dasa who composed Srimad Bhaagavata did not deviate much, in relative terms, from the original in Sanskrit in terms of episodes, whereas some others who composed other puranas did, and did to such an extent that their work bore scant resemblance to the canonical. Pitambara Dasa’s Nrusingha Puraana is a glaring example in this respect. Original puranas (in the sense that for one such, there was no corresponding purana in Sanskrit) and puranic tales, some of which were quite imaginative, were composed in due course. Decidedly, the most popular among them is – has always been - Balarama Dasa’s Lakshmi Puraana. Nrusingha Puraana is also an original purana in the above sense, but it is more or less a forgotten work.

An example of the way Jagannatha Dasa’s Srimad Bhaagavata, the most holy and the most popular of all puranas, deviated from the Sanskrit original, is the following: in the eleventh book of the Bhagavata, there is the episode of the public woman Pingala’s sudden spiritual awakening. Both Vyasa and Jagannatha Dasa attribute it to her past karma, and not to Vishnu’s grace. In Vyasa’s text, after her spiritual awakening, she became serenely quiet and profoundly composed within, and rested calmly. In Dasa’s version, as the dawn arrived, she retired to the deep forest to spend the rest of her life devoting herself completely to Krishna.
Krushna Charana Sahu lists eighteen points of difference between Sanskrit Bhagavata and Dasā’s *Srimad Bhagavata*. In terms of the nature of deviation from the canonical version these are similar to the one mentioned above. One of the points of difference Sahu notes relates to where the snake Kaliya bit Krishna; in the Sanskrit text, it was some vital parts (*marma sthaana*) of his body, in Dasā’s version, it was his feet. Consider still another: In Dasā’s version, Krishna killed his son Pradyumna, whereas in Vyasa’s composition, Krishna had no role in his death. The two works differ with respect to the manner of Kansa’s death; in Dasā’s work, Krishna held Kansa by the hair, fixed his gaze on him, and killed him with that piercing gaze, but in the Sanskrit original, he jumped on him and dragged him on the ground. In both, Kansa was absorbed into Krishna. In short, Dasā’s departures are marginal. But the fact that he departed from the canonical text at all is not insignificant, considering that the text in question is a profoundly sacred text. For an Odia, as for many others, as a sacred text, it has the same status at least as Srimad Bhagavat Gita.

Pitambara Dasā’s *Nrusingha Puraana* tells a story very different from the one of the man-lion avatar of Vishnu as narrated in Vyasa’s Bhagavata. In Dasā’s purana, Nrusingha and his brother Seshadeva were avatars in the human (not the man-lion) form of Vishnu and the serpent god Seshanaga, on whom Vishnu rests in his yoga nidra posture, respectively, and they killed the asuras Mura and Daruna (not Hiranya and Hiranaksha), who were indeed Jaya and Bijaya, the gatekeepers of vaikuntha, the abode of Vishnu.

In his retelling Sarala sometimes blended a classical story with a folk narrative. He created this style and in his hands it became an effective story-telling technique. Such a fused narrative is like a simile, so let it be called an “episodic simile”. The simile was often used to suggest that in certain matters the nobility and the erudite, and the common man were no different from each other. Putting it in linguistic terms the simile is reminiscent of a fully inflected word, which has a root and one or more affixes. But here the root is not more important than its affix in any manner; both are of equal importance. There is an episode in *Udyoga Parva* describing how Dhritarastra had successfully persuaded Duryodhana not to disappoint Krishna and give two villages to the Pandavas, and how, after that, Sakuni had convinced him about the futility of such a decision and persuaded him not to give any part of the kingdom at all to his cousins. Duryodhana’s wife Bhanubati (also referred to as “Bhanumati”) counselled him against accepting Sakuni’s suggestion, and pleaded with him to
share his kingdom with the Pandavas. If one wanted, she told him, to enjoy the property that did not belong to one alone one would surely come to grief, as did the ghost called Babanaabhuta. An ordinary ghost story was brought into a serious discourse for the purpose of illustration. And the ghost story is the affix here.

Thus into Sarala’s narrative entered a farmer and a ghost. A ghost with a personal name – probably the only ghost in the entire bulk of Odia ghost stories with a personal name. The scene of the action of Bhanumati’s story was a village near the river Tungabhadra in Odisha, far, far away from Hastinapura, and the name of the ghost was Babanaa, a typically Odia personal name, still in use, and still given to one who does not belong to the privileged population; its a name given to one more often by the outsider than by the members of one’s family. The surname of the farmer who knew how to deal with the ghosts was Raula, again typically Odia, and his first name was Sudreka, the Odianized form of Sudraka.

This was Bhanumati’s story: the dead of that unfortunate village turned into ghosts and would gather at an open field and have fun. Sudreka Raula who came from the far-away Saurashtra wanted to settle down there and got that piece of land from the villagers to grow tila (til, a variety of oil seed). They had warned him that that place was haunted, but he told them that he knew how to control ghosts. He arrested them all when they troubled his ploughmen and released them when they promised him that they would do no more mischief in his land and would also give him a huge amount of tila as the price for their release. At that time the leader of those ghosts had gone somewhere. When he returned, the frightened ghosts told him everything. He was angry and wanted revenge, so he possessed Raula’s only son. Surely he had no idea of the power of Raula, and was soon pleading with him for forgiveness and release. The ghosts suffered because they usurped the property that belonged to the village. And said Bhanumati, likewise Duryodhana would suffer if he did not share his kingdom with his cousins.

Consider another example where the episodic simile has a more elaborate structure. There are the prefix and the suffix, and there is the root – there are two classical narratives and the folk one is interspersed between the two. It is somewhat loosely connected with the prefix narrative, and is better integrated with the suffix narrative. Here we set aside details of the affix narratives, and focus on the root narrative. In a certain context in Udyoga Parva Sakuni
told Yudhisthira that the virtuous lived long and the sinners died early. Yudhisthira did not agree. To his maamu (uncle) he asked the question that has been asked since the dawn of human civilization – may be even before: why must an infant die, who is without the sense of the right and the wrong, and for that reason untouched by sin?

Sakuni did not give a philosophical answer (in fact, he side-stepped the question), and told him a story instead, the locale of which was a place near the river Krushnaveni. There was a lazy person named Melaka, who used to cut wood for livelihood. Once there was a rainy spell during which he and his wife starved. Thus one day as he was on the verge of cutting to pieces a wooden murti of Vishnu for wood, the great god materialized and assured him that as long as he was alive, he would get his daily requirements of food without having to work for it. For reasons of poverty and of jealousy towards the woodcutter, one day his neighbour Ananta, (in Odia, Anantaa, a word that carries the diminutive and humiliating suffix aa) decided to break the murti of Shiva and at once the god of destruction appeared before him in a terrible form. Shocked and frightened, and in the spirit of one who had been wronged, Ananta told him about Melaka, and about how he had been rewarded for doing the same thing. Shiva said that gods would be afraid of an ignoramus, one without any ethical sense, but would be merciless towards those who had the sense of the right and the wrong, and who lived a moral life, as did Ananta himself. Melaka lived a comfortable life and Ananta continued to live in poverty. But death changed it all; Melaka suffered in hell, and Ananta was reborn as the king of Kashi. Now to the suffix narrative, Sakuni told Yudhisthira that Duryodhana was like the lazy Melaka, and he, Yudhisthira, was like the poor Ananta. In consideration of this, the uncle suggested to his virtuous nephew, he should retire to the forest again, leaving the son of Dhritarashtra to rule (Udyoga Parva, 224 – 238: 65-152). Yudhisthira, with uncharacteristic curtness, asked him to give that advice to Duryodhana, who should now go to the forest for a change, leaving the kingdom to the Pandavas.

Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata can be viewed as the poet’s reporting to his listeners at another yuga the story of Mahabharata that the great sage Agasti had told the great king Baibasuta
Manu. Thus the entire narrative of Sarala is “quoted material”, borrowing an idea from sentence grammar again. To pursue the analogy a bit further in order to explicate the essential structure of the text, there is an abstract superordinate “main clause” and there is an abstract superordinate “subordinate clause”. Sarala seeks the blessings of god Ganesha to be able to “say” the Mahabharata – *ye mahaabhaaraata kahibi*…(I will say Mahabharata) (*Aadi Parva* I: 3: 26). This is essentially the content of the superordinate main clause and a form of *kah* (*kahibi*, for example) is the verb of this clause. The content of the superordinate subordinate clause is the entire story of Mahabharata, as mentioned above. These superordinate abstract constructions are realized as many complex sentences of the following form: “Sarala said that…” Now, there is yet another kind of construction that occurs in the text. Its content is constituted by whatever the poet says by way of self-reference throughout the text: things about his family, his education (in fact the lack of it), his profession and his village, goddess Sarala’s grace on him, the inspiration behind his decision to compose *Mahaabhaaarata*, even his previous existences, and the like (in the form of expressions such as “I, who am uneducated and illiterate”, “I, who was asked by the goddess Sarala…”, etc. for example). This construction might be viewed as a kind of adjunct clause, attached to the appropriate main clause. Such constructions occur dispersed throughout the text, as do the complex sentence constructions mentioned above.

The sage Agasti’s narration was occasionally interrupted by Baibasuta Manu, his keen listener and his devoted pupil. At times the pupil would stop the sage to seek clarification; at times he would request him for more details. Sometimes he would request him to explain why something happened the way it did or happened at all. He would often offer the venerable sage worship and would then request him to continue his story. However Sarala’s narrative contains nothing to suggest that someone or the other from his audience similarly interrupted him as he was telling them the story. It flowed on.

Sarala’s *Mahaabhaaarata* is a long and meandering narrative. The story of the Kurus, of the Yadavas, of numerous kings and princes and princesses, and of the gods and goddesses and the sages, who came into the ambit of the life of the warring Kauravas and the Pandavas, the poet Sarala’s self-referring little pieces, his numerous prayers to various gods and goddesses, etc. are all integral parts of this retelling. It starts with a quiet, sublime, and meditative tone as the poet offers prayers to god Ganesh, Devi Sarala, and Jagannatha, Balabhadra and
Subhadra. The same tone lingers as he pronounces the superiority of *Mahaabhaarata* to all the other puranas, and dwells on the story of creation – how from the Void came Wind, and how at a certain stage during the process of creation appeared the trinity of gods, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, and how at the end the humans arrived. Once the story of Santanu and Ganga begins, the narrative acquires momentum and flows majestically on till it completes the story of the Pandavas, the Kauravas and also the Yadavas. Those who were born and played out their destinies on earth were restored to existence in different forms, in different celestial abodes. Yudhisthira saw Bhishma, Drona, Salya and Sakuni shining as stars, as he assumed his divine form in the abode of the celestials. His brothers, and Duryodhana and his brothers were all there in heaven as well as all others who had fallen in the battlefield of Kusukshetra. Enmity had disappeared; they were now different beings, unaffected by the memories of their earthly existence.

Although the story of the Kurus is narrated almost without a pause, the flow of the narration is not even. It is slow and meandering when the poet describes the *swayambaras*, the weddings, the feasts, the pilgrimages, and reflections and regrets of some of his characters. In *Aswamedha Parva* and *Musali Parva*, for example, after being asked by the avatari Vishnu to end his sojourn in the land of the mortals, Krishna reflected on some chapters of his life which he had lived irresponsibly, raising in that process a huge family of sons, grandsons, and great grandsons. He had got greatly attached to his family, and was deeply pained thinking that time had come for him to leave them all. He wept. Krishna’s suffering is described in a tone of disbelief, a tone that is almost comical; here is the bhakta Sarala conceptualizing the avatara and describing the *leela* (not as in *Gitagovinda* with its pervasive sense of strong sensuality, but in the sense of cosmic play) of the Creator of maya being entangled in maya. The narration is turbulent when Sarala describes wars, which are many. The turbulence assumes great intensity as the poet describes Bhima’s fight with Dussasana and his brutal dismemberment of him, and then again during his fight with Duryodhana in which he inflicted mortal wounds on the latter. When the living grieved over their loving dead, the flow of the narration slows, as when Yudhisthira did, sitting by the fatally wounded and humiliated Duryodhana, or when Duryodhana wept inconsolably seeing the severed heads of Draupadi’s sons. But the last part of the episode of Duryodhana’s crossing the river of blood provides perhaps the most telling example in this regard. He crossed the river of blood on a corpse, and discovered on reaching the shore that it was the dead body of his dear
son Lakshmana Kumara, who he had persuaded with difficulty earlier that night to leave the battlefield for his safety, and about whose death he did not know. The discovery unsettled him completely. Sarala’s couplets are intensely moving when he deals with Duryodhana’s sorrow. The flow of the narrative is quiet and the tone, serene whenever there is a prayer. And prayers to various gods are interspersed throughout Saarala’s Mahaabhaarata.

As Sarala ends his long story with a short and intense prayer to Narayana, it regains the serene tone of its beginning. One could imagine that five hundred years ago, after uttering the ritual, formulaic incantation to conclude his narration, as the poet became silent, his listeners quietly retraced their steps homeward, deeply contented and profoundly fulfilled. That was their real phala sruti (gains in terms of religious merit, etc. for having listened to a purana). They had heard an elevating story. That was not all: they had heard Krishna katha!

Stories do not die, only people who the stories are about, die. This is a plausible interpretation of what the wise Yudhistira had repeatedly said in Sarala’s Mahaabhaarata: katha rahithiba (story will remain). In some moonlit evening when Sarala’s story reached its end, it passed into eternity, the home of all stories. Some day some storyteller would recall it and retell it in his or her own way.

Sarala wrote at a time when Odia had become a fully developed language. The language had been used for creative expression much earlier; there are excellent poetic compositions dealing with metaphysical and philosophical themes. Such extant texts are no doubt few, but this might be primarily because of the lack of support for the language for centuries - the language used for creative expression all those years was Sanskrit. It was the language of prestige. Till the fifteenth century, the rulers were non-Odias, from whom Odia seems to have received no encouragement. In the fifteenth century when Sarala wrote, there were residues still from Sanskrit and Dravidian languages in Odia; thus for instance, in Saarala’s Mahaabhaarata, there are words like yeka, yesaneka, etc., that show Dravidian residue, and
there are words like *laheNa* (with iron) and *raageNa*, which carry the instrumental post position *Na* of Sanskrit. Alongside *Na*, there was the native *re* as the instrumental marker as well, but quite a few words in *Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata* occur with the Sanskrit marker. Many tatsama words occur in their colloquial spoken form; thus *snaana* occurs as *srahaana*, *yudhisthira*, *jujesti*, *duryodhana*, *drijodhana*, *kunti*, *kointaa*, *sakuni*, *sankuni*, etc. (*Aadi Parva* I, 447). There are hundreds of such examples.

Although the language was well developed in terms of lexicon and syntax, language use was yet to be organized in some sense. Words were not yet subcategorized as formal, semi-formal, informal, etc. Practically no word was excluded from use, with the exception of the taboo ones, which explains why for *muta* (urine) Sarala uses a kind of euphemism in the form of a Sanskritized phrase, namely *mutra nira* (urine water) (*Aaadi Parva* I, 473: 34). He uses *prakruti sanskaara* “nature induced cleanings” for morning ablutions. The corresponding words in colloquial Odia seem to have been considered unworthy of occurrence in a serious narrative such as a purana. Since the words were not yet subcategorized in the above sense, a couplet could contain the tatsamic and native words both: *baaluta ainthaa paaile pitrugane / bahuta saananda taankara upujai mane* (If the forefathers (in other worlds) get the left-over of a child (of their family) / Great joy arises in their mind) (*Aadi Parva* I, 214: 168). Here *ainthaa* is native and *pitrugane*, *saananda*, etc. are tatsamic. Here is another example: *badayanti agasti suna manu gnaantaa / yethi uttaru hoilaa jete kathaa* (Says Agasti, listen O Manu, the wise / What all happened after this) (*Aadi Parva* I, 272: 1). There is a mixture of the formal and the colloquial here: the first line is more formal, the second, more colloquial. Mixing of styles was not prohibited then because distinctive styles had not yet emerged.

In short, what was available to Sarala was a language that was fully developed, but was yet to be organized in the matter of style. Thus the use of words was virtually constraint-free. The vocabulary was rich. In the component of grammar too, residues from Sanskrit were still there, increasing thereby the range of available grammatical forms for use. For instance there was the passive construction with the recipient as subject (corresponding to the English construction “Ram was given the prize”) – a construction that Sarala copiously used and that is no more in use. And almost whatever could be talked about could be included in a composition. No convention about the length of a line in a couplet had been developed yet. It was as though as long as the flow was smooth, the effect lyrical, and a significant line or the
couplet memorable, any length was acceptable. In short, the linguistic resource available to Sarala was really vast. He could choose anything to express himself. He chose words he intuitively felt were natural for his purpose. He used couplets which of course rhymed at the end, but the lines were not always of even length. But they gave a sense of completeness, and very successfully captured the rhythm of common speech. This form could be perhaps viewed as an ancestral form of blank verse. Sarala’s poetry is never strained and it never sounds artificial. In short, the poet’s creativity found its fullest expression in this linguistic environment of abundance of resource and freedom of choice.

Now if there was no constraint against mixing at the level of style, one would presume that there would be none with regard to the mixing of episodes too. In fact, this indeed is the case as noted above in the discussion of episodic similes. The mundane and the commonplace occur alongside the weighty and the solemn: the episodes of baabarapuri, baabanaa bhuta, the lazy Melaka, among such others, with their unmistakable flavour of the familiar and the commonplace, occur alongside the episodes of puranic dignity and profundity. Similarly ordinary events in day-to-day life find place in Sarala’s telling, such as the quarrels between Kunti and Gandhari, and between Draupadi and Hidimbaki (also called “Hidimbaka” in Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata). Even Duryodhana’s passing urine found place in Sarala’s retelling of the Mahabharata story (Aadi Parva I, 471-472: 8-15). People quarrel in every family; a living body releases its waste. But such commonplace finding place in sacred discourse – Sarala called his composition a “purana” - is surely something that never occurred in the puranic discourse in the classical tradition.

But what effect does this mixing produce? Is it one of disharmony? Consider the episode of Duryodhana’s passing urine and the events surrounding it (Aadi Parva I, 471-478). Perhaps no episode would strike as more banal and more inappropriate for inclusion in the Mahabharata narrative than this one. And at the same time there are only a few episodes in the entire narrative that have contributed to its development as much as this has. Therefore it is arguably the most relevant episode for consideration in the present context.

Sarala’s story is this: Duryodhana had confined his maternal grandfather, king Gandharasena, and his family in a stone house and had arranged to starve them all to death in the most cruel and cynical manner. He would reduce the quantity of food and water supplied
to them every day. His unfortunate prisoners knew that they would all perish; therefore they chose one of them, Sakuni, the eldest son of the king, to remain alive to take revenge. They denied themselves food and water, so that he lived. Everyone was dead, and Sakuni was the only one alive at this point of the story.

Then one day the unthinkable happened: Duryodhana was urinating under a banyan tree, when he saw a fruit of that tree flowing away in his urine. He was amused at this “oddity” of nature, of God’s creation. A banyan tree is so big and so strong that even the strongest wind and the heaviest rain cannot shake it. Its fruit contains the seeds of so many banyan trees, and yet such a thing flowed away in his, a mere human’s, urine. This made him smile.

There was a female attendant of his who was standing at some distance. She saw him smile, and she smiled too. Duryodhana saw this and got angry, thinking that she was laughing at him. He asked her why she smiled. Was she making fun of him, he asked. She said whatever made him smile made her smile (Aadi Parva I, 472:19). Duryodhana then asked her why he had smiled and threatened that if she did not tell him, she would be put to death. The frightened woman said she would tell him on the following day. Duryodhana relented, and gave her a day’s time to choose between life and death.

She happened to be the attendant who carried food to the stone house. Later in the day when she went there, she told the man inside through a hole that that was the last time she brought him food because on the following day her nose and ears would be cut off by the king. The man from inside asked what she had done to deserve such punishment. The woman told him all that had happened. The man told her that she should fearlessly tell the king that he had smiled on seeing a fruit of such a big and strong tree, which carried seeds that could grow into equally big and strong trees, flowing away in the flow of his urine. The following day Duryodhana was stunned to hear this from the woman. He couldn’t believe that she was capable of thinking it out. She told him who had been her saviour. So impressed was he with the intelligence of the man in the stone house that Duryodhana immediately freed Sakuni, and apologized to him profusely. He believed that he was the knower of the past, the present, and the future, and immediately appointed him his minister. He took him to his sister Gandhari. Instead of being happy that at least one from her father’s family had escaped death, she was very unhappy and very upset at these developments. She – the mother - warned Duryodhana
never to go by Sakuni’s advice, because she knew that he would work single-mindedly towards the destruction of the Kauravas.

The story does not lack credibility, at least arguably, but even some among those who think it so, might still feel very uncomfortable that such an important decision was taken on such a flimsy ground. In *Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata*, whatever Duryodhana was, he was by no means a stupid and ignorant person. He was judicious and intelligent, well versed in the shastras, and had a sense of discrimination. He was also a sensitive person. Therefore it would appear unconvincing that a person of his calibre took these very serious decisions the way he did. In this context, *Kaancikaaberi*, a poetic composition with a mythological theme, by the eighteenth century poet, Pursottama Dash, deserves mention. Incidentally, it is a minor work that nevertheless has had considerable impact in that this theme was the subject matter of many poems and plays later in both Odia and Bengali (see Mansingh, M. 1981: 199-203). In the decisive fight between Utkal (roughly, the present day Odisha) and Kanchi in Dash’s composition, gods fought on behalf of their respective kings. Jagannatha took the form of a cat to defeat Ganesh, the presiding deity of Kanchi, who had taken the form of a mouse. The great Odia poet and critic, Mayadhara Mansingh, was sharply critical of the casual and unconvincing manner in which the narrative dealt with matters of such serious political import. For some reason Mansigh did not say anything about the episode dealing with the beginnings of Duryodhana’s very special relationship with his maternal uncle in *Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata*.

Now, can something be said in Sarala’s defence? His Duryodhana did not lack in intelligence and discrimination, but it was not his mind but sheer blind faith that governed his relationship with Sakuni. His wife, his father, and most importantly, his mother, had cautioned him against his uncle. His mother had almost forbidden him to go by his advice (*Aaadi Parva* I, 477: 87-89). In the clearest of terms his mother and later his wife had told him that Sakuni had a motive and an agenda for revenge. This should have been crystal clear to Duryodhana himself; it is beyond comprehension why he thought that one prince’s crime of the most heinous kind would be answered by the wronged prince in terms of goodwill and affection. His trust in Sakuni was so great that it accommodated no skepticism at all, ever! When an intelligent person like Duryodhana acted with such incredible stupidity, it looks as though destiny had taken control of his relationship with his uncle.
From this point of view, any beginning of their special relationship could be viewed as credible as any other, because here logic and reason would have no place. The crazier the story, the more effective is the execution of this idea. And this interpretation is in consonance with the largely deterministic perspective that controls Sarala’s narrative. Was it not destiny that had written up all that happened between Dhristadyumna and Drona or Draupadi, Bhima and Dussasana, for example, and so much else? If Krishna is viewed as one manifestation of determinism then can there be any doubt about what controlled what all happened?

Consider the matter now from the laukika (roughly, worldly) perspective. Duryodhana wanted the Pandavas to be killed. He must have figured out that as long as the Pandavas lived, he would never become the king of Hastinapura or if he did, his kingship would never be safe. As for eliminating the Pandavas, he was certain that he would not have an iota of support from any Kaurava elder, including even his father, who alone of the elders wanted him to inherit the throne. Duryodhana was in need of someone, exceptionally shrewd and clever, who would have no affection for the Pandavas and no reason to wish them well. He might have thought that Sakuni answered that need perfectly. He was convinced that his uncle could read others’ mind, and thus could read the enemy’s mind. Such a person could bring him victory against his enemies.

And he was not alone to hold that opinion about Sakuni. The shrewd Vidura had the same opinion too. That was why as soon as Duryodhana made Sakuni his minister, he met Yudhisthira and informed him about the developments, which he said would bring the Pandavas serious trouble. He advised him to take particular care of Bhima. Incidentally, the very next episode in Saarala's Mahaabhaaraata is about the building of the jau or laksha (roughly, lac) palace in which to burn the Pandavas alive, and also about feeding Bhima poisonous food. Sakuni dominated the coterie of Duryodhana, the other members of which were Karna, Krupacharya and Aswasthama and for the first time the plans to kill the Pandavas were hatched, confirming Vidura’s apprehensions. With Sakuni entering the narrative, began a critical chapter in the story that ended in the battlefield of Kurukshetra.

Sarala’s characters, both major and minor, his heroes, even the great sages and gods who appear in his story, have all a distinct streak of the ordinary; they are more like the characters
one finds in folk tales. More often than not they think and act like very ordinary people: spontaneous, unsophisticated, and unreflective. Thus Parvati could be seen taking lice off Shiva’s matted hair, and Krishna could be seen crying in the Kurukshetra battlefield on seeing Bhima lose. An avatar of Narayana himself, he could be afraid of death. And not just that. So great was his attachment to his large and loving family that the very thought of separation from them, which would happen when he would return to vaikuntha, made him feel utterly, utterly miserable. If this is what Sarala’s world in the narrative is like, then Duryodhanas banal reflections on that fruit of the banyan tree and all that subsequently happened with respect to the same would by no means be out of tune with it.

Sarala had created a style of purana narrative in which he blended the lofty and the commonplace harmoniously. Poets who wrote purana in Odia subsequently made use of his style, but none with his mastery. Nowhere near it. The incomparable Sarala had created a style and excelled in handling it.
THE SECOND ESSAY

Whatever the meaning of “purana” in Sanskrit literary criticism in Odia, it simply means a “religious text”. *Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata* can be read as a purana since its primary concern is the celebration of the doings of Krishna, who was Narayana himself. He was of course an avatara of Narayana, but this part-whole, avatara-avatari (the incarnation and the One who incarnates Himself) distinction did not amount to much in the poet’s mind as he conceptualized his Krishna. At the surface level, Sarala’s retelling of the great ancient story is concerned with the issue of the inheritance of royal power and authority in a specific context and matters surrounding it, and at the deeper level, with dharma and moksha. Sarala had an “episodic” imagination. His creative genius found its most elegant expression in the form of powerful, credible episodes. He was a storyteller par excellence. His story was pure, unsoiled by metaphysical and philosophical ruminations.

It is then no wonder that in *Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata* there is no Bhagavat Gita, although there is the context for it in the form of Arjuna’s disinclination to fight and kill his own relations. Even with regard to the classical text it is sometimes held that it originally did not contain the Gita, and that it was a later interpolation, but whether or not it is the case is inconsequential for us here. By the fifteenth century when Sarala composed his *Mahaabhaarata*, Bhagavat Gita had already got imprinted in the popular imagination as an integral part of the Mahabharata narrative; therefore it may not be unreasonable to assume that as far as Sarala was concerned, it was indeed part of the canonical text. However, when he excluded it, he surely did not do so for reasons of fidelity to some original, pre-interpolation version of the narrative. Such an intention can hardly be attributed to the one who introduced numerous changes, both significant and small, in the story as he retold it. The exclusion would have been readily intelligible had he tried to tell a shortened version of the story, but he didn’t; his *Mahaabhaarata* is considerably longer than the Sanskrit Mahabharata
- 40,000 couplets longer, as it is generally held. Besides, he did not exclude the context for the Gita discourse. He created an episode that essentially performed the function of the Gita.

Did Sarala think that the Gita discourse was not in consonance with the character of Krishna as he conceptualized it? In his *Mahaabhaarata* Krishna was not portrayed at all as a meditative person, but basically as a man of action, more of a doer than a thinker, who acted in pursuance of his avataric objective, namely, to reduce the burden of the earth. But surely the poet could have constructed from the Gita the logic to persuade Arjuna to fight and articulated the same in a non-reflective and non-meditative style. This was completely within the poetic competence of Sarala. He simply did not do that.

Then could it be that Sarala excluded the Gita because he wanted to avoid the spectacular: two tense armies poised against each other, ready to fight, remaining completely inactive during the period of the Gita discourse, when no one knew what was going on between Krishna and Arjuna, and Krishna showing his Universal Form to Arjuna, among others? The answer can hardly be in the affirmative. Since the puranic (or its equivalent in other literary traditions, such as the epic) narrative is characterized by a good deal of melodrama and spectacle, spectacle would not have been out of place in Sarala’s story. Even a cursory reading of his work would show that Sarala was not shy of the spectacular at all, especially when it came to depicting the *leela* (divine play) of Krishna – isn’t the Gita itself a kind of *leela* of Krishna from one point of view? Now what Sarala chose to have in place of the Gita was dramatic, if not as dramatic and certainly not as spectacular: Yudhisthira’s going to the Kaurava side alone and unarmed, receiving the blessings of the venerable persons on that side, then pleading with Duryodhana for one last time for at least a single village in an attempt to avoid bloodshed, and finally succeeding in creating a dissention in the Kaurava army, etc.

This was how Sarala’s reluctant Arjuna joined the fight. When Krishna found that he was unwilling to start the war, he did not say anything to him, and directly went to Yudhisthira and apprised him of Arjuna’s stand. Yudhisthira said that he himself shared Arjuna’s reluctance, and would, even at that stage, make an attempt to avoid bloodshed. It was thus Yudhisthira in *Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata* who was the last person to go to Duryodhana to avoid a war among brothers. It is a good twist to the story; it is a good deal more appropriate
that the eldest of the brothers must at some point of time go to his obstinate younger brother to stop a disastrous fratricide. Ignoring the warning of his brothers, Yudhisthira went alone and unarmed to the Kaurava side and sought the blessings of Bhishma, Drona, Karna, and Aswasthama, among others, for victory in the war. Then he went to Dhritarashtra and in his presence pleaded with Duryodhana for just one village, if he was unwilling to give him five or three. Duryodhana refused, and insisted on war. It was only then that Yudhisthira realized that war was unavoidable. In the battlefield he invited anyone who wanted to fight for the cause of dharma to abandon the Kaurava side and come over to his, where he would be most welcome. In response, one of Duryodhana’s brothers, Durdasa, declared that he was joining him. Terribly upset at this development, the Kauravas attacked both Durdasa and Yuudhisthira, both still in the enemy’s territory in the battlefield. When Krishna informed Arjuna about his eldest brother’s plight, he set aside all inhibitions and joined the war. Raw reality has indeed a way of solving problems, be they deep and genuine or superficial and sentimental or merely superficial appearing to be deep, whatever.

To return to the question of the exclusion of the Gita in Sarala’s *Mahaabhaarata*. From the point of view of a pure storyteller, The Gita does not appear to be a discourse that would yield a single, coherent and tightly organized story or a single, well-connected set of stories. Whereas digression is indeed a characteristic feature of the puranic (and the itihasic, ignoring for the present purposes the distinction between purana and itihasa) stories, introducing a series of stories at a critical point in the narrative, namely the start of the war, would have affected its easy flow. This might not be an unreasonable or unsatisfactory surmise for the supreme storyteller’s decision to leave out the Gita as he retold the ancient story in his language.

*Shaanti Parva* in *Saarala’s Mahaabhaarata* can be brought into the discussion in this context. It is the shortest parva in this text. Let us assume, for methodological reasons that Sarala was quite conversant with Vyasa Mahabharata and with a considerable bulk of puranic literature in Sanskrit as well. Such an assumption can help us to gain some understanding of the inventiveness of the poet as a storyteller. We note that the poet chose to exclude a good bulk of content of the *Shanti Parva* of Vyasa Mahabharata when he composed his own version. This parva deals primarily with Bhishma’s advice to Yudhisthira, as he was waiting for the propitious time to die, on a range of matters - from the administration of the kingdom
to personal conduct and *raaja dharma*, the dharma of the ruler. In order to concretize his thoughts and ideas, Bhishma would sometimes tell stories; included among those were the stories of Parshurama, Indra, and Prahlada. Sarala, who was a natural storyteller, could have retold at least these fascinating stories, but he chose not to.

Of course Sarala didn’t have to restrict himself to retell Vyasa’s stories alone; he could have told his own. His *Mahaabhaarata* is full of episodes and tales which do not occur in Vyasa’s work. In his *Shaanti Parva* there was enough scope for stories. The episodes dealing with Bhishma’s advice, the cremation of the bodies of the Kaurava brothers and of Bhishma, and Yudhisthira’s coronation as the king of Hastinapura provided enough scope for stories, but Sarala did not create any, tell any.

He didn’t, probably because such stories would have distracted attention from the story of the Pandavas and the Kauravas, and of course of Krishna. The episodes and stories that one finds in *Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata* and does not find in the Sanskrit *Mahabharata* are mostly about the Pandavas, the Kauravas, and Krishna, and they give the meandering narrative some tightness of structure. These episodes reveal important aspects of the characters concerned – their greatness as well as their ordinariness - as they appear in different situations. We provide a few instances below:

In *Gadaa Parva*, there is the episode of Duryodhana’s crossing the river of blood. On the seventeenth day of the war, fighting did not stop at sunset, but continued in the darkness of the night. During the seventeen days of the war Bhishma, Drona. Karna, Salya, Bhurishrava, Dussasana, ninety eight Kaurava princes, and Sakuni had all fallen. Kripacharya had been defeated, and disfigured by Arjunas’s arrows. Aswasthama had left the battlefield. From among the known warriors of the Kaurava side only Duryodhana remained. In the darkness of that night the fighters failed to distinguish between the enemy and the ally, and killed blindly. So many were killed that there flowed a deep river of blood on the battlefield. Duryodhana did not know about it as he was hiding under the huge bell of a dead elephant. He noticed it when he came out after the fighting stopped late in the night with the victorious Pandavas having returned to their tents. In order to escape from the Pandavas and go to a place of safety where he could plan out his next move, he had to cross that river that very night.
He needed a raft, but there wasn’t any there, and he was getting desperate. Then he found a body floating towards him with its face upwards. He recognized it; it was Dussasana’s. He wept bitterly as he recalled all that his brother had done for him when he was alive, and he thought he would serve him in death too. As he sat on the body it sank into the depths of the river. The same happened with the bodies of Karna, Drona, Sakuni, and others.

But one body carried him across to safety. It was a body that had come floating towards him with its face downward, unlike those before. So he did not know whose it was when he sat on its back. On reaching the bank, as he turned it, he saw the face of his dear son Lakshmana Kumara. The father’s grief was profound. With the death of his son, his lineage had come to an end. But there was no time to weep as much as he wanted to; he had to leave the battlefield. He tore off part of his cloth, placed the body on it, covered it with earth and left.

The last moments of Duryodhana on earth are described in deeply moving language in Kaainsikaa Parva. Duryodhana lay dying and at Yudhisthira’s instance, Durdasa, who had changed to his side shortly before the war started, was now keeping watch so that the wounded Duryodhana was not troubled by jackals and vultures and lower existences such as pishachas.

Aswasthama had gone to kill the Pandavas and it was still dark when he returned with six severed heads. He had taken revenge, he told Duryodhana. Those, he said, were the heads of the five Pandavas and Dhristadyumna, his father Dronacharya’s killer. In the light of the dawn the truth became evident: the five heads were of Draupadi’s sons. Duryodhana was utterly devastated. He severely reprimanded Aswasthama. With Ghatotkacha, Abhimanyu and Laksmana Kumara gone, Draupadi’s sons were his hope for the continuance of the Kuru lineage, he said, and the vile Aswasthama had destroyed that last hope. He condemned him and abandoned him. He asked Durdasa to bring the heads of Draupadi’s sons, and place them on his chest. With those heads on his chest, the eldest Kaurava breathed his last.

These reveal the tenderest aspect of Duryodhana’s nature. And the noblest too. At that moment Draupadi’s sons were not his enemy’s children. They were his; with his own son
killed, he did not think of them as those that would have continued only the Pandavas’ and not his line. Such a distinction did not matter to him at that time. What did was that they would have continued the larger Kuru lineage. Thus they were his hope too. At that point of time when he remembered Ghatotkacha, Abhimanyu and Laksmana Kumara, he did not distinguish between them; he did not think of them in terms of his enemy’s sons, and his own. In that moment of grief and also of overwhelming love, he had risen far above that narrowness. He died a deeply disappointed and distressed man, but at the same time he died as one whose suffering had cleansed him within. It is inconsequential that in Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata, unlike in Vyasa’s, gods did not shower flowers on him when he took his last breath. But by showing his audience his profoundly caring and humane nature, Sarala had compensated him far more richly than that. He had elevated him to the level of the sublime.

Now to an episode concerning the Pandavas: “the mango of truth”. The interest value and the importance of this episode lie in that here the Pandavas and their wife Draupadi declared the truth about themselves. With the probable exception of Draupadi, they might have said nothing that would have struck any of them as new. But it is an altogether different matter when in others’ presence, one claims to speak the truth about oneself, and thereby commits oneself. But how does one know how true is the other’s self-declaration of truth? Sarala deals with this question in terms of an unfailing test in his episode.

Nine years had passed since the Pandavas had left for the forest, and there were just three years left for them to go for one year’s ajnaanta vaasa (living incognito). Duryodhana was worried and was anxious to know where they were and what plans they were making in that regard. So he decided to send one Gouramukha to find out their whereabouts. But Gouramukha had never even seen the Pandavas before and the latter had not seen him before either. Duryodhana advised him that he would find them among sages and that he would be sure of their identity if they delivered something impossible. He told him to meet them in the disguise of a sage, and ask them for a ripe mango, ready to eat – an impossibility, since it was autumn and not the mango season. If they produced one, he should be certain that they were indeed the Pandavas. Only the Pandavas, he told him, could produce a mango out of season.

Gouramukha acted according to the plan, and Yudhisthira was very much worried that the sage wanted something that was impossible. He remembered Krishna. He appeared, as he
always had whenever those dear to him had remembered him, and reassured Yudhisthira that getting a mango in autumn was no problem really. Truth could produce a mango, he said. All that the Pandavas and Draupadi had to do was speak the truth about themselves. However if any one of them told a lie, the entire effort to get a ripe mango would be wasted.

The sage Vyasa brought a mango stone and Krishna’s grace infused life into it. Then came the time for the declaration of truth. Yudhisthira said that he always spoke the truth and was not afflicted by greed. He never gave in to anger and hatred. But he would not hesitate to choose war if there was no way left to regain his kingdom. The mango stone sprouted, confirming thereby the veracity of his words. Bhima said no amount of food, fighting, and sleep could ever satisfy him. As for sex, he always longed for more. He said he would kill the Kaurava princes – each one of them. He revered Yudhisthira, but would not tolerate insult to his mace by anyone without exception. Now the sprout turned into a tree with four large branches. Arjuna said that no one could defeat him so long as he had his bow, gaandiva, in his hand. He said he never coveted what belonged to others: wealth or women. He would never harm a defeated enemy leaving the battlefield. He would not tolerate any insult to Krishna, his divine quiver, akshaya tunira, his bow, and the divine arrow paasupata. He would kill anyone who dared do that. The blossoms appeared on the tree.

Incidentally, both Bhima and Arjuna later faced situations in which they had to act against the offenders. When in anger Yudhisthira uttered words that disgraced the divine bow Gandiva, Arjuna set out to kill him. When Kunti in despair and anger abused Krishna, Bhima was on the point of attacking her. He too would not stand any insult to Krishna. It was Krishna’s intervention that saved the situation in each case.

Now Nakula said he lived a moral life, and had no great passion for food, sleep or sex. He was completely loyal to Yudhishthira. He would protect at any cost any one who sought his protection, even if it meant fighting his brothers. Small mangoes now appeared. Sahadeva said that he was all-knowing, and whoever sought his advice would not perish, but he would not volunteer to offer any advice or suggestion to anyone. At this, the mangoes grew in size; they became really big. But they were raw, and Draupadi had to tell her truth for them to ripen.
Probably concerned that she might not tell the truth, Krishna made a special appeal to her. Earlier he had warned Bhima – so his apprehension about Draupadi was unconnected with the prevalent belief, then and now, that women tended to hide things - of the consequences if he told a lie. To Draupadi he didn’t issue any such warning; he didn’t threaten her even implicitly. On the contrary he humoured her – he knew who to threaten and who to humour; he reminded her of her birth from the sacred fire, and told her that she was more important than the Pandavas, etc. Given her supra-human origin and her status, she just could not afford to tell a lie, he told her. Draupadi said that she had the womanly weakness for handsome males, that she did not have equal affection for all her husbands and that she loved Arjuna more than her other husbands. She said that she would be the cause of the destruction of the Kaurava brothers. The mangoes ripened by her truth.

The Pandavas and Draupadi here reveal to all present there – Krishna, Vyasa, Gouramukha, and other sages – truths about themselves. But much more importantly they were sharing their respective truths among themselves. It is this sharing that the episode is really about; the mango is just an excuse. The episode is not merely about the secret truths of the Pandavas, but also about the power of sharing, even without the agent’s intention to share. Each of them had a contradiction to own up – for example, Yudhishthira wouldn’t hurt anyone, but would not hesitate to go to war to get back his kingdom, Bhima was totally devoted to Yudhisthira, but would kill anyone who insulted his mace, and his “anyone” did not exclude Yudhisthira. Arjuna wouldn’t hurt anyone fleeing from fight, but wouldn’t spare such a person even, if he insulted Krishna. Nakula was totally committed to Yudhisthira, but would have no hesitation in fighting him in some specific situation. Sahadeva, the all-knowing person, knew what would benefit someone, even his brothers, but wouldn’t help unless his help was explicitly sought. Draupadi had five husbands but was partial towards one of them. But these were not confessional statements in the Christian sense of the term; these were by no means statements of regret or repentance. None of them felt guilty or even apologetic about his or her contradiction, which constituted just one truth about the person concerned; for example, as truth, Yudhisthira’s contradiction did not have a higher value than his statement that he spoke the truth. This episode of declaration of truth brings to mind saccakriya of the Buddhism, which in essence is that the declaration of truth results in extraordinary changes in the world around (see The Jatakas, p.337).
Turning to episodes involving Krishna, there are several of them in *Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata*, which is as much about the Kurus as about Krishna. He indeed is the dominant character in this work. Episodes about him deal with the majesty and the divinity of him as well as with his human frailties. Here we consider an example of the ordinariness of Krishna.

Fear of death and anxiety even in the thought of it are among the basic frailties of the ordinary human being. There are two episodes which reveal these unexpected aspects of Krishna – “unexpected” because Krishna was an avatara. From a different point of view, it is not unexpected at all, because although an avatara, he was human too. In him, Narayana and nara occupied the same conceptual and manifest space.

Dussasana had been dismembered in the battlefield and Draupadi had tied up her hair with his blood. That evening Draupadi sent word to Bhima, the redeemer of her honour, that she wanted to spend the night with him. When her message was delivered to Bhima, Krishna was with him. He told him that after he satisfied her, he should get off the bed and pray to her in all humility to spare the Pandavas and Krishna from her sword. Bhima was baffled, but surprisingly, he did not ask Krishna why he wanted him to do so. In fact, he did not say anything at all to Krishna at that time. But he did exactly what Krishna had asked him to do. Draupadi did not fail to figure out who had advised Bhima to seek such an assurance from her, and she told him as much. She then gave her verdict, which was her word too: she would spare Yudhisthira and none else. There seems to be some lack of clarity about whether “none else” actually included Krishna; in any case, when Bhima conveyed the message to him, there was no ambiguity in his words. The text says nothing about the impact of her words on Bhima, but it clearly says that when Krishna got to know what she had said, his tongue became parched, and for a moment he couldn’t utter a word. It was as though his death was announced, and at that moment he was experiencing the terror of it.

Later, after the war was over and the new order had come into being with the crowning of Yudhisthira as the king of Hastinapura and with the certainty of the continuance of his lineage as his grandson Pariksita, who was born dead and was restored to life with his intervention, Krishna was chided by the avatari Vishnu for overstaying in the mortal world and was ordered by him to return to his permanent abode. Krishna knew that his time had
come, and he also knew that he had to destroy his family before leaving the mortal world. He wept in sorrow. He recalled the heady days of his youth when he had enjoyed the company of so many women. As a result, he had acquired a big family of wives and sons and grandsons and great grandsons, who all adored him. He was alternately assailed by grief and regret. He was deeply pained by the thought of parting from them, and worse, of having them eliminated. He regretted having indulged in the pleasures of the body and developing attachments which had become the cause of his suffering.

This is a very realistic account of the plight of one who is too deeply entrenched in the snares of the world to face death with dignity, grace and equanimity. Sarala, whose work suggests that he was an uncompromising moralist on matters of sex and as such was very uncomfortable with Krishna’s sexual profligacy (only the later Odia poets of the Vaishnavite persuasion viewed Krishna’s physical relationship with the gopis in spiritual terms, as a symbol of the union of atma, the embodied Being, with paramatma, the Universal and the Eternal One), dealt with Krishna’s grief in considerable detail in this episode which occurs in Aswamedha Parva. Here more explicitly and more emphatically than anywhere else in his Mahaabhaarata, he projects the most distinctly human aspect of Krishna.

Part of the episode on the fall of Duryodhana in Gadaa Parva brings to focus the three most important Pandava women: Kunti, Draupadi and Subhadra. As each of the Pandava brothers claimed that he was solely responsible for the victory, the Pandava women had their own perspective on this matter. Like Yudhisthira and his brothers, each of them claimed that she alone deserved credit for the victory in the war. Draupadi asserted that she was a profoundly virtuous woman, and she indeed was the force that wiped out the Kauravas. Not to be undone, Arjuna’s wife Subhadra said that whatever everyone said was far from the truth; the Kauravas were destroyed because of her brother Krishna who avenged the death of her son Abhimanyu. A true kshatriaani (wife of a kshatriya), Kunti was surely not the one to keep quiet. She said that she had undergone terrible suffering for years and years and that she had been constantly praying to god Dharma for justice to her. That, and nothing else, was the real cause of her sons’ victory. These women were not there when the severed head of Belalasena who had watched the entire proceedings of the war told the Pandavas the truth about what had happened in the battlefields of Kurukshetra, but their being or not being there is really inconsequential. If what the severed head said did not dispel Bhima’s illusion, would it really
have changed the Pandava women’s perspective? Isn’t truth for humans only what they think to be true? In the attitudes of Kunti and her daughters-in-law Sarala sees a very common feature of human nature: one suffers from a kind of self-importance which leads one to the enchanting, grand delusion that one is the cause of events of great significance.

There are many other episodes in *Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata* which are new in some way with respect to the canonical version. These primarily localize the story: thus, for example, Kapilasa, near the present-day Dhenkanal in Odisha, becomes the favourite abode of Shiva, Krishna receives worship in Nilachala, today’s temple town of Puri, in the form of Jagannatha, and in a very endearing episode, Yudhisthira marries an Odia girl.

Yudhisthira had already handed over his kingdom to his grandson Parikshita and with his brothers and their wife Draupadi was on a pilgrimage prior to their final journey. They came to Biraja kshetra, today’s Jajpur in Odisha, where they were staying for a while. One day a trader named Hari Sahu met him with his grown up daughter Suhani. When Yudhisthira asked why he had not given her daughter in marriage, he said that she was destined to die during the marriage ritual. He then begged Yudhisthira to marry his daughter. The latter straightaway refused saying he was old and was already into his *vaanaprastha*. However he was persuaded by his brothers to marry the girl; it would be unethical, they said, to refuse to marry the girl when her father was offering her to him on his own. Yudhisthira married the girl. The Pandavas spent a few years there before resuming their pilgrimage. Yudhisthira left Suhani behind and asked her to go to the hills of Kapilasa and worship Shiva there. On their way back, he would take her with him, he told her. He never returned.

The episode is not without drama. Yama’s messengers arrived for Suhani as the ritual was going on, but could do no harm as Arjuna tied them up. Then came Yama himself, and Arjuna prayed to him to spare the girl. But he wouldn’t oblige; so he tied him up too. He set him free later at Hari Sahu’s request. The great god blessed them all. This episode does not
add to our understanding of the characters concerned, nor does it enrich the story significantly. On the contrary, many may consider it an unnecessary appendage to it. But it localizes the Pandavas’ story, a creative effort that for the poet was presumably far more important than say, being faithful the canonical story.

There are again certain episodes in Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata which do not occur in the canonical version and which do not have any specifically or explicitly localization purpose. Often they do not contribute to the development of the plot or the enrichment of the characters, but such episodes are not specific to Sarala’s composition; inclusion of such episodes is a characteristic feature of the puranic narrative style. These generally provide colour and richness to the narrative and add interest value to it. Of such episodes the following is worth mentioning not just because it has a flavor of freshness; it is also because in relation to similar others, it is arguably most creatively integrated into the structure of the narrative.

In the Kaurava court Krishna said that Duryodhana’s kingdom was like Babarapuri. He had gone there as Yudhisthira’s emissary to ask Duryodhana for just five villages for the Pandavas since he was unwilling to share the kingdom with them even after they had successfully met all the requirements for the same.

No one in the court knew anything about Babarapuri. Bhishma requested Krishna to tell them about it. He narrated the story of the city. In western Saurashtra, there was a state called Kurala, in which there was the city called Babara. Bhandeswara (lord of the cheats) was the king there, and Baibhanda (crazy cheat) was his minister. The deity people worshipped there was called Andia, who was naked and whose hair was unkempt. It was a strange city. Instead of shastras, the citizens studied texts on cheating. Cheats and liars were rewarded, and the honest people were punished. Both men and women moved naked in the open, and when they did wear something, it was to only cover their head. They wore nothing on their waist. They
indulged in sex whenever they liked, and didn’t even distinguish between their blood relations and others. People paid no taxes to the king and they observed no distance between themselves and the king. It was a prosperous city and was not under threat from any enemy. It had in fact no enemies.

Then all of a sudden calamity hit the city. People started talking about the arrival in their city of a strange creature which they called kokuaa, and soon the city came under the vicious grip of some incomprehensible fear. People were afraid to move out and even in daytime the city remained deserted. There were terrible stories about kokuaa; some said it had seven eyes, others said it had a grotesquely huge body, although no one had really seen this creature. Elders used such descriptions of this creature in order to discipline children. One day the terrible tension caused by fear burst into a fight. People went on a killing spree. Soon all that remained of that prosperous, enemy-free city were the dead bodies.

Krishna observed that Duryodhana’s kingdom was like Babarapuri. Nothing threatened it from outside. But Duryodhana’s thinking had gone awry, which was ominous. The Kauravas would be destroyed because of their arrogance and folly.

So such are among the kinds of episodes that occur in Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata that stretch the narrative and distinguish it from Vyasa Mahabharata.

To say that at one level, Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata is about the issue of succession might appear to be saying only the obvious. This issue is at the heart of the Mahabharata narrative; so it is only to be expected that a retelling of it would be no different in this regard. But the way Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata presents it is not exactly how the classical text does.

In Sarala’s narrative, Satyavati was not Santanu’s wife. She was sage Pareswara’s (better known as Parashara) wife, who had seduced her before he married her for selfish reasons. From their pre-marital union the great Vyasa was born. Santanu’s wife was Ganga and
Bhishma was their only surviving son, the mother having killed all her sons as soon as they were born. The sage-like Santanu did not marry again after Ganga left him, and he never had any longing for any woman. He had two sons, Chitravirya and Bichitravirya, who were Bhishma’s elders and who were not born out of a natural womb. Deeply concerned that Ganga might harm them too, Santanu left them in the care of Satyavati. After Ganga left, she entered Santanu’s household as the mother of Chitravirya and Bichitravirya. Ganga had cursed these children that they would die issueless, and had cursed Santanu that Bhishma’s son would kill him. The bridegroom Bhishma got to know about it when he went to meet his father before proceeding to the bride’s, Amba’s, place. He threw away his bridegroom’s crown and took the oath that he would never marry and would thus never be the cause of his father’s death. Chitravirya and Bichitravirya got married in time, but they had no issue. Ganga’s curse had materialized. Chitravirya died of leprosy, and Bichitravirya drowned himself in the sacred Prayag as an act of sacrifice order to redeem himself of the sin of being issueless. After the death of his elder bothers, Bhishma looked after the kingdom essentially as the caretaker.

Ambika and Ambalika were the widows of Chitravirya and Bichitravirya respectively. At Satyavati’s behest Ambika got from Vyasa a son, who his father named Dhritarastra. The baby was born blind, and Ambika died during the birth of her child. Satyavati then persuaded Amalika to get a child from Vyasa. Her child was named Pandu. She felt so unclean and sinful about her union with her elder brother-in-law that soon after the birth of her son she sacrificed herself in Prayag. It was not that the widows were unwilling to have issues under those special circumstances from such an arrangement within the family; in fact, they had told Satyavati that they had no objection to having children from Bhishma, who was their younger brother-in-law and with whom such relationship was socially permitted. But Satyavati could not persuade Bhishma to beget children with his sisters-in-law. Bhishma never forgot his mother’s curse on his father.

Dhritarastra and Pandu got married, and it was soon after the latter’s marriage that the question arose of crowning of Bhishma as the king of Hastinapura. Anyway he was looking after the kingdom, so what remained was the formal crowning. But when Santanu raised the matter with him, with great humility he refused. He told his father that he was burdened with the misfortune of remaining issueless; therefore he considered himself unsuitable for
kingship. An issueless person was ritually deficient in terms of the prevalent belief system. There are observations in Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata to the effect that no matter how religiously meritorious, one who died issueless could not attain swargaloka (the heavenly abode). Bhishma was constantly worried about his destiny on that account. Much later, as he lay on his bed of arrows, he expressed his concern to Krishna. He had no cause for worry, Krishna assured him; every devotee of him would be his dharma putra (spiritual son), he said.

Although Sarala does not explicitly say so, it would certainly be in consonance with his thinking if one interprets Bhishma’s refusal to be the king on an additional, namely political ground. A wise, morally upright person that he was, he must have thought that one who would never be able to provide the kingdom the successor to the throne ought not to be the king, and his father must have seen the merit of Bhishma’s stand, which must have been why he never tried to persuade him to reconsider it. Now Bhurisrava of a saintly nature would never agree to be the king, and Dhritarastra was blind. It was thus that his younger brother Pandu became king.

It was not that Dhritarastra had never been crowned king. Later, on a certain occasion Bhurisrava had to remind Dhritarastra about what had happened when he was the king. Hastinapura had been attacked by Kaladaman, and he, Dhritarastra, its king, had fled. At that time Pandu was in the forest doing his tapas. When he returned from the forest fifteen years after, on successful completion of his tapas, he fought and killed the usurper. It was then that Pandu was crowned king.

Pandu extended the territory of his kingdom through conquest, and looked after his subjects well. He thus earned commendation as king, and everyone was happy with him. Except of course Dhritarastra; he was jealous of his brother’s reputation and achievements. He cursed himself for his blindness on account of which he, despite being the elder brother, was deprived of his right to rule. He seemed to have forgotten about the Kaladaman phase. Once when Dhritarastra was pouring out his grief to Gandhari, Pandu overheard it. Surprised and hurt by his elder brother’s unhappiness, he readily abdicated in favour of him, and retired to forest with his two wives, Kunti and Madri. When Sanjaya, the minister, objected to the
crowning of Dhritarastra on account of his blindness, Pandu assured him that he would protect the kingdom on behalf of his brother from the forest itself.

Pandu was tormented by the fact that he would never have an issue. Setting aside details, he had been cursed that he would die during sexual intercourse. The sage Agasti told Pandu that Kunti had a mantra from the sage Durvasa, using which she could have children. He advised Pandu and his wives that the latter should get children using that mantra. The power of the mantra was such that whosoever’s presence was sought for sexual union must appear and oblige. The women must invoke gods for the purpose because that way no moral blemish or disrepute would accrue to them for having sex outside marriage. Besides, their children would be exceptional. It was thus that Kunti had children from gods Dharma, Pavana and Indra, and Madri, from Aswini Kumara.

After the death of Pandu and Madri, Kunti and hers and Madri’s (henceforth just Kunti’s, unless it becomes particularly necessary to refer to Nakula and Sahadeva as Madri’s children) children went to live in Hastinapura, but Dhritarastra’s and Kunti’s children simply could not live together. Soon circumstances led to Kunti and her children moving out of Hastinapura to live in Indraprastha.

One day Dhritarastra brought together Sanjaya, Vidura, Bhurisrava, Bhishma, Karna, Aswasthama, Sakuni, Salya and Kripacharya, and sought their advice regarding who, from among his sons, to hand over the kingdom to, since he considered himself unworthy to be the king on account of his physical disability. They should give him the right advice, in all honesty and sincerity, without fear or embarrassment or any sense of obligation.

Bhurisrava made it clear that the one he should hand over the kingdom to was, unquestionably, Yudhisthira. It would be against the demands of dharma to ignore him and give the kingdom to Duryodhana. Vidura concurred. But then the burning of the palace of wax happened, and it was believed that Kunti and the Pandavas, who were supposed to be staying there, were consumed in the fire. Thus when Dhritarastra consulted his advisers again to seek their support for his choice of Duryodhana as his successor, Bhishma gave his consent, and there was no disagreement. Soon in the presence of great sages like Vashistha, Vishwamitra, Markanda, Balmiki and Vyasa, Duryodhana was ceremonially and ritually
anointed king of Hastinapura. Incidentally, in the first meeting Bhishma had not said anything, presumably because he agreed with Bhurisrava. In the second meeting when he supported Dhritarastra’s proposal, he mentioned one or two nice things about Duryodhana to indicate that he was a deserving choice.

Later, after he was informed about the marriage of the Pandavas with Draupadi, Dhritarastra was compelled to invite the Pandavas to Hastinapura. Yudhisthira suggested that instead of going to Hastinapura, they should stay in Indraprastha where they were staying earlier. But Dhritarastra would not hear of it. The bride, he said, must be welcomed to the family in the family’s ancestral palace. Soon after their welcome in Hastinapura, Yudhisthira left for Indraprastha along with his brothers, mother Kunti and their wife Drupadi.

With the successful performance of the raajasuiya yajna, Yudhisthira’s wealth, prestige and status increased immensely. But it didn’t take long for him to lose everything. He lost his wealth to Duryodhana after the fateful game of dice in the Kaurava court. He had to spend twelve years in exile in the forest along with his brothers and their wife Draupadi and the thirteenth year in disguise. After undergoing all this, when Yudhisthira asked Duryodhana to give him just a few villages, if not his share of the kingdom, the latter refused. In short, this is Sarala’s construction of the story of succession.

Yudhisthira was an extremely generous person, and he most sincerely wanted good and affectionate relationship with Duryodhana, who he looked upon, not as his cousin, but as his brother. That was why he wanted him to give him a part of the kingdom (as far as he was concerned, a small share, as small as just a village or two), when it would have been perfectly legitimate for him to demand that Duryodhana hand over the entire kingdom to him. He was aware of his inheritance rights - it was on this basis that he asked at all for a village or two; he didn’t ask for charity, although the verb he used was de – its root form - (give), which is ambiguous in Odia and in the appropriate context would mean “give in charity”. But in the relevant context it did not mean that at all, and no one had that impression either. Now, one
could argue that although he did not use the expression “division of the kingdom”, that was in effect what he was asking for. It was unacceptable to Duryodhana, at least at that stage. In fact, division of the kingdom as an explicit proposal for the solution of the succession issue was never considered by either party. The spirit behind Yudhisthira’s appeal to Duryodhana was entirely honest and generous too, and was totally unconnected with such a proposal. All the same it is certainly open to debate whether intention and spirit can be taken as crucial factors in order to make sense of a political issue of such momentous significance as this.

In *Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata* the kingdom of Hastinapura was never divided. Duryodhana did not die as the crown prince; he died as the king of Hastinapura - he had ascended the throne of Hastinapura soon after the wax palace incident. Yudhisthira had no kingdom to lose in the game of dice with Duryodhana. What he had lost was whatever wealth he had acquired as gift from his father-in-law Drupada and from others too, such as the kings who had participated in the *raajasuiya* yajna. When Dhritarastra returned everything he had lost in the game to him, including his and his brothers’ freedom, he did it, not as the king, which he was not, but as the head of the family. This was entirely appropriate because the game was played, not between two kings, but between two cousins of the same family. Yudhisthira had no royal treasury to spend from when he conducted the yajna; he got some hidden wealth which he used for the purpose with the blessings of the sages. He did not perform this yajna to declare his supremacy as the ruler, which he in case was not, but for the progress of his father Pandu in the other *lokas* as advised by the sages.

In this interesting version certain questions do not arise that do in a version, such as the canonical one, where the kingdom was actually divided. There Yudhisthira lost his kingdom in the game of dice, and Duryodhana died as the crown prince, etc. In that version one wonders why, after his victory in the war, Yudhisthira did not go to his kingdom Indraprastha, which he had lost in the game of dice. He went to Hastinapura instead, where the king, his uncle Dhritarastra, who had lost the war, was alive, and arguably ruling, albeit technically, after the crown prince Duryodhana’s death. By all accounts, Yudhisthira had fought the war, not to dethrone Dhritarastra and conquer Hastinapura, or even to undo the division of the kingdom, but to regain his own kingdom, Indraprastha. In view of this, such action smacks of the conqueror’s arrogance and demonstration of power.
However, attributing such an intention to Yudhisthira would not of course be in consonance with his character in the text. It would be a great deal more in the spirit of the narrative to suggest that he went to Hastinapura to meet his elders and comfort them and try and build again a sincere relationship with Dhritarasra as his nephew. And then there were the dead bodies of their relatives lying on the battlefield, and they had to be cremated, and it needed Dhritarasra’s support since he was the head of the family. Thus the best interpretation of Yudhisthira’s action is that he had no dark agenda in going there.

But still questions remain. For instance, why did he ascend the throne of Hastinapura? Once the kingdom of the Kurus was divided, only Indraprastha was his kingdom. He could ascend the throne of Hastinapura only as the conqueror. Once he became the king of Hastinapura, Hastinapura and Indraprastha were united; the same would have happened had he, after the war, ascended the throne of Indraprastha which he had regained; it is entirely unlikely that Dhritarasra would have liked to continue as the king of Hastinapura under those new circumstances. True, the territorial consequences would have been the same either way, eventually. But from a moral point of view what Yudhisthira did amounts to annexation of the conquered territory.

Earlier, when Bhima killed Jarasandha, the latter’s son became the king there. His kingdom was not annexed to Krishna’s, nor did Yudhisthira become the king there. With Krishna’s support he could have become king. But that did not happen. Why did something very different happen in Hastinapura, which was against Yudhisthira’s nature?

But with the Kaurava brothers and their sons all dead, was it at all possible to have a similar arrangement in Hastinapura as in the kingdom of Jarasandha? It was. True, Dhritarasra might not have liked to continue to rule the kingdom – for obvious reasons. But there was one brother of Duryodhana still alive: Yuyutsu (the counterpart of Sarala’s Durdasa in the canonical text), who had gone over to Yudhisthira’s side in the Kurukshetra battlefield. He could have been made king of Hastinapura. This arrangement would have been in conformity with Yudhisthira’s nature.

Uneasy questions such as these do not arise in Sarala’s version. When Duryodhana died, Hastinapura became a kingdom without a ruler. As the victor, in other words, as the one
responsible for such a state of affairs, and also as the member of the Kuru family, it was Yudhisthira’s preeminent political and moral duty to provide a ruler to the kingdom. That he did that by assuming the kingship of Hastinapura.

Let us consider certain matters surrounding the issue of successor to Dhritarastra in a broader perspective. Ordinarily the eldest or the oldest surviving son of the king would inherit the throne, if he was not generally considered to be seriously flawed either physically or morally. That was roughly the norm, and that was how Bhishma was chosen successor to Santanu. In special cases of course there were departures from it. That was how Dhritarastra had become king, despite being physically challenged. He always thought that as the eldest Kaurava prince, he was the rightful successor to Santanu. His limitations were set aside when his younger brother Pandu decided to abdicate in his favour. Therefore it is rather ironical that later when it came to choosing between Yudhisthira and Duryodhana, the king Dhritarastra was the one to question “the eldest son” principle of inheritance. During the first meeting with his advisors he observed that there had been notable departures from it; he cited Dasaratha’s case - the king in another yuga who had not handed over his kingdom to his eldest son. Vidura reacted quite sharply: he reminded him that the great king had perished as a consequence, and that Bharata did not become king either. He sternly warned him that he too would perish along with his sons if he ignored the eldest son in the family, namely Yudhisthira, and chose his son Duryodhana as his successor. In the same meeting Bhurisrava too observed that Duryodhana had no claims to the throne because Yudhisthira was his elder. Now although Yudhisthira was the eldest of the princes of the entire Kuru clan, he was not the eldest son of the ruling monarch – it was Duryodhana. But if this did not seem to matter to anyone, it might not be merely because the Kuru elders and the preceptors of the family justly looked upon the entire family as one unit when it came to the question of succession.

As far as the other factors were concerned, Bhurisrava stated them unambiguously and unequivocally in that first meeting. He said that it was no secret that Dhritarastra had become king only through Pandu’s generosity. Earlier when Pandu was doing tapas, Dhritarastra lost the kingdom of Hastinapura, and when Pandu made him king again, he could rule the
kingdom only because Pandu was protecting it on his behalf. Therefore, as far as he was concerned, Dhritarastra was only formally the king of Hastinapura; in moral terms, the real king was Pandu. Therefore Pandu’s eldest son should inherit the kingdom.

These apart, Yudhisthira’s high moral stature and great popularity could simply not be ignored. These were not merely very weighty considerations for Bhurisrava; these were conclusive too. The subjects would leave the kingdom, he warned Dhritarastra, in case Duryodhana inherited the kingdom instead of Yudhisthira. It would have been another matter if the eldest prince was found wanting in some way. Was the elder prince Yudhisthira deficient and unworthy in some respect that he was considering giving the kingdom to Duryodhana, he asked Dhritarastra in an almost accusing tone.

There was an issue that Duryodhana constantly raised later with respect to the Pandavas which does not seem to have been considered seriously by the Kaurava elders, their kulaguru (family preceptor) Kripacharya and their guru, Drona. If indeed they had, they did not discuss it in any detail with him in order to make him see that his point did not have weight. For Duryodhana that issue was really the decisive factor when it came to the question of the Pandavas’ right to the kingdom. Duryodhana never considered the Pandavas as part of the Kuru clan with the exception of Sahadeva. Yudhisthira, Bhima, Arjuna and Nakula were the sons of gods, not of Pandu, which was why in his view they were rank outsiders to the Kuru clan, and as such had no right to the kingdom. The fact that the Kaurava princes were the sons of a widow was inconsequential with respect to the inheritance issue; for a child to belong to a family the “mother factor” would not carry much weight. Of course begetting offspring from outside wedlock in special circumstances was neither socially unacceptable then nor new to the Kuru clan. In any case, Vyasa was not as much an outsider to the family as were the gods Dharma, Pavana, etc. He was, after all, the son of the foster mother of Chitravirya and Bichitravirya.

Why did the venerable Kaurava elders not view the four Pandavas the way Duryodhana did? As we look for an answer, we must rule out one factor right away, namely the fear factor. Bhishma, Bhurisrava, etc. were learned men who lived virtuous lives, and were great warriors too. They were not the ones to be afraid of even the gods. That apart their thinking about the Pandavas on the matter of their membership of the Kuru clan was also not due to
their affection and goodwill for Pandu and their consideration for his widow. A possible explanation (or some version of it) in terms of Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata might be the following: they considered Pandu’s concern about having to die issueless eminently legitimate (it was believed that after death, the upward progress of such a person in the other lokas was arrested. Significantly, any thought of or anxiety about his son inheriting the kingdom did not even occur to him.), and they treated as unexceptionable what had received the approval of the great sage Agasti. It may be recalled that it was this venerable sage who had suggested to Pandu’s wives to beget sons from the gods. Pandu had given his consent to this. Also involved in this arrangement was the celebrated sage Durvasa, although more indirectly than directly, one might think. However he did – had to, really, a devotee of Krishna would like to think - intervene directly only once by neutralizing his mantra, when Madri invoked Narayana himself with his mantra. In any case it was his mantra that worked as the instrument.

There was a similar division of opinion between the Kaurava elders, etc. on the one hand and Duryodhana and many of his close associates and advisers on the other with regard to the legitimacy of Draupadi’s having five husbands. The former did not consider Draupadi immoral on this account. Here too the fear factor and the indulgence factor have to be set aside. The Kaurava elders knew that the Pandavas had gained status and power through their alliance with the daughter of the king of Panchala. They knew that the marriage had Krishna’s support. They knew that the power equation showed the superiority of the Pandavas, but the great Kaurava elders were not the ones to approve of something they considered immoral because of considerations of power. And the elders knew, as did everyone else so well, that they could not be trifled with if it came to a war. After all, it was well known that Bhishma had humbled the incomparable Parsurama.

The Kaurava elders and guru Drona were happy that the Pandavas had not been burnt to death as they had thought and as was commonly believed, but their happiness over this and their affection for the Pandavas were irrelevant as far as their attitude to Draupadi’s having five husbands was concerned. They were morally too upright to take their stand on such serious matters based on such sentimental or emotional considerations. So what made them accept it which was believed by some to be outside the norm? It was perhaps this: Draupadi’s marriage to the five Pandavas had the sanction of the venerable sages including Vyasa, who
was not looked upon by the Kurus as an outsider to the family. It had the sanction of Krishna also who they knew was Narayana himself. Since they had blessed the marriage, the elder Kauravas had no hesitation in accepting it. They did not reject the authority of the code but they valued much higher the words of the wise and all knowing Vyasa and the avatara Krishna.

Duryodhana’s stand on both of the above can perhaps be understood in terms of his attitude to the role of authority in legitimizing deviations. “Authority” in this specific context means the Kuru elders (not excluding Vyasa), kulaguru Kripacharya, guru Drona, and sometimes Krishna – all of them or sometimes even any of them, in particular, Vyasa or Krishna. For Duryodhana, the authority’s attitude with respect to both the issues was downright unreasonable. That the four Pandava brothers were sons of gods was a biological fact, and from his point of view, the sages had misused their moral authority to have them accepted as sons of Pandu for all social and political purposes. Thus four outsiders became an integral part of the Kuru family. Similarly a woman having more than one husband under ordinary circumstances was considered immoral in terms of the prevalent moral code. It was not part of that code that because she was not born out of a womb (she was “born” from the sacred homa fire), she would be exempt from the code. The approval of the sages and of Krishna to her marriage was tantamount to their legitimizing a clear violation of the moral code. Duryodhana too knew who Krishna really was, but so what if he was Narayana. If the code said an act was immoral, it was immoral. Legitimizations of immoral acts were for him nothing short of acts of tyranny by the authority, and he was not so naïve as to fail to understand the unwelcome consequences these had for him. He resisted, and thus started the power game that ended in the battlefield of Kuruksetra.

Duryodhana was convinced that he was right; he never had a doubt that he was wrong. After the code of the Kuruksetra war was formulated, he told Yudhisthira that they were going to participate in a dharma yuddha (righteous war), where Narayana himself was the witness, and where dharma would emerge victorious: dharma pramaanare hoiba sesare haara jina (in the end victory or defeat will come in accordance with dharma) (Udyoga Parva, 396: 66). Duryodhana was not an ignorant person, untutored in the sastras, and devoid of moral sense. In a certain context, Sahadeva once described Duryodhana as follows: ...se atai mahaavijna / surabanta, pandita se atai sarbaja (…he is very wise / he is brave,
learned, all knowing) (*Bhishma Parva, 57: 42. Therefore when he rejected the view of the authority on the matters under reference, he surely was convinced that he was on the side of the right.

Incidentally, Kunti’s view regarding a woman having more men than one was not really very different from Duryodhana’s. She felt unclean that she had to have sex with so many – first the Sun god, then Pandu, then the god Dharma, etc. It was no relief to her that sex with gods would not stigmatize her, as the sage Agasti had assured her. Her feeling of pollution in this regard came from within. That painful feeling would return to her when she had to invoke one god after another.

Kunti’s case was really more complicated than this, and her feeling of guilt should not perhaps come as a surprise. Pandu’s fear of dying issueless was resolved with the birth of Yudhisthira; therefore there was no need for her to have two more sons. When she decided to have more children, it was succession that was in her mind. When she found Yudhisthira to be extremely kind hearted and compassionate, ignoring details of how she came to this conclusion, she felt that he would be unfit to inherit the kingdom, especially when her sister-in-law Gandhari was very much jealous of her. And she had already become the mother of a hundred sons. Therefore she invoked the wind god, Pavana, who would give her a strong son. But she soon found Bhima crude and wicked, and she realized that he didn’t have the necessary mental faculty to become a good archer - it was believed that the archer would win a war. This was in her thoughts when she invoked Indra. Thus what Kunti did was essentially immoral; she knew that her purpose was selfish, and she understandably felt polluted. But why did the wise sages support such an immoral act? In *Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata* the answer is clear: having the power to see the future, they knew that the Kauravas would turn out to be wicked, and they did not want the wicked to rule. They wanted the virtuous to rule, and they knew that the Pandavas would follow the path of dharma. Incidentally, although Kunti regarded Yudhisthira’s remarkable compassionateness to be a weakness, she surely did not want one of her younger sons to inherit the kingdom; she did not say or do anything that would undermine his eldest son’s claim to the throne. In having more sons, what she wanted was a protective ring around Yudhisthira so that he would be safe from harm, from Gandhari, in particular.
It was because he considered the four Pandavas as outsiders to the family that Duryodhana was unwilling to accept their claim to the throne of Hastinapura. This is where came the case and the claim of the fifth and the youngest Pandava, Sahadeva.

In *Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata*, Sahadeva was both Pandu’s and Aswini Kumara’s son – Pandu’s biological son, and Aswini Kumar’s spiritual son. One day, when Kunti and the four children were away in Hastinapura, Pandu lost control over himself and overpowered the reluctant Madri, who was well aware of the dreadful curse on her husband, and had sex with her. As they consummated the act, the curse materialized. An arrow came from the above, pierced through Pandu’s back and went right into Madri’s chest, killing both. The dying Madri gave birth to a son – one instance of puranic reality. The world would come to know him as Sahadeva.

The baby was crying in the open, uncared for, and hungry and the Sun god saw him. He asked Aswini Kumara to attend to him. The baby was dead by the time the god arrived. He infused life into the dead baby and blessed him. Thus Sahadeva was both Pandu’s and Aswini Kumara’s son. And since he was Pandu’s son, the Kaurava princes considered him as part of the Kuru clan and recognized his right to the kingdom. Dussasana said so quite explicitly in the Kaurava court after Yudhisthira lost his wealth and his brothers in the game of dice, and when he did, he wasn’t surely expressing his personal opinion. He said that the four Pandava brothers would be assigned different tasks in the palace, such as cooking, supplying water, etc., and Pandu’s son, Sahadeva, would rule over half the kingdom. The four Pandavas were bastards, and only Sahadeva was their brother. If things did not take such a turn, it was surely not because the Kauravas subsequently changed their view of Sahadeva’s inheritance rights. It was because the youngest Pandava did not even respond to such talk. As one who had the knowledge of things to come, he surely knew where he belonged and what his task was.

The discussion would be incomplete if Karna does not figure in it. In *Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata* everyone knew that Karna was the eldest son of Kunti, who grew up in Radhebi’s house. Karna was not a Pandava, not because he was born before his mother’s marriage with Pandu – in Sarala’s narrative the word “Pandava” is totally unrelated to Pandu. Here Yudhisthira and his brothers came to be known as Pandavas when they killed a demon called Pandavasura. Karna was not part of this engagement as he was not living with Kunti.
and her children; he never did. Pandavas looked upon him as their eldest brother and recognized his right to rule their kingdom. Yudhisthira, Kunti and Krishna each had said this to him on different occasions. Yudhisthira said this to him on the Kurukshetra battlefield itself when he went to the Kaurava side to seek the elders’ blessings for his victory. Karna had indeed blessed him for victory. Like Bhishma he had his reasons for not agreeing to rule Hastinapura. In sum, in Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata, Bhishma, Bhurisrava, Karna, and Sahadeva belonged to a category of persons who had claims to the throne, but none of them was interested, each for his own reason. As such they remained outside of the Kurus’ deliberations on the question of inheritance of the kingdom of Hastinapura.

Thus there were two different perspectives on the inheritance question: one was based on respect for the authority of Vyasa and Krishna, and the other, on rejection of that authority when it regularized deviations. The clash of these paved the way to the Kurukshetra battlefield.

Dharma is one of the major concerns of Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata. Dharma is a complex matter. In our view, a reasonable approach to gain an understanding of it in this narrative is to see in what senses the word dharma (and related words, such as adharma, papa, etc.) is used here. Dharma as a proper noun is used to refer to god Dharma. As an abstract noun, it is used in more senses than one. In its most predominant sense, it relates to righteousness and virtue, manifest in a morally good day-to-day life. Here virtue is a relative, context-bound concept. Bhishma and Karna, for example, who in the dharma yuddha at Kurukshetra fought on behalf of Duryodhana, were, from the perspective of Sarala’s narrative, virtuous persons, as was Yudhisthira. The word is also used in the sense of religious merit, and then again in the sense of some basic, absolute, moral principle that sustains the world and that protects the practitioners of virtuous living. Yet in another use of the word it is about the sense of justice.

Given below is one example of the word dharma in each of its senses in Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata. Dharma in the first sense is used when Kunti invoked god Dharma to have a
child from him: **bho dharma debataa boli sumarile hrudagate** (Saying “O god Dharma”, Kunti invoked (him) in her heart = Kunti invoked god Dharma) (*Aadi Parva* I, 176:13). The god who appeared wore pure white clothes, and he dazzled with bright divine light. He is described as the embodiment of purity, untouched by any kind of blemish. In its second sense, the word is used in the following: **paape praani kshaye honti dharma thile jaya** (Those who live a life of sin perish (and) those who live a life of virtue become victorious) (*Gadadhar Parva*, 101: 200). In the sense of religious merit it is used here: **dharma naasa jaaiti anukula aarambhole** (religious merit is lost if one starts one’s journey (in certain circumstances)) (*Bhishma Parva*, 319: 100). In the “sustaining moral fabric” sense of the world, it is used in the following: **dharma aasre karne achara achara kaarya** (Take refuge in dharma, whosoever wants to live) (*Bhishma Parva*, 118: 228). In the following words of Yudhisthira dharma is used in the sense of justice: **duryodhana raajaa je upaksha kalaa dharma / mote bhaaga na dei ichchilaa sangraama** (King Duryodhana ignored dharma / instead of giving me my share, he wanted to go to war with me) (*Bhishma Parva*, 118: 224).

The following is ambiguous: **jujesthinki dahija kale dharma na gachchai** (If you burn up Yudhisthira, dharma cannot move = If you burn up Yudhisthira, dharma cannot thrive (in the world)) (*Naari Parva*, 7: 77). After he saved Yudhisthira from Gandhari, this was what Krishna told her when the angry mother grieving for her sons she had lost in the war tried to burn up the eldest Pandava with the all-consuming fire that issued forth from her uncovered eyes. It is ambiguous between the following interpretations: Virtue, in its relative, context-bound sense, would not exist in the world if Yudhisthira perished, and virtue, in the sense of the absolute moral foundation that sustains the world, would be shaken if Yudhisthira perished.

Now the question is what constitutes virtue (dharma) and what constitutes its negation (adharma, papa) in terms of *Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata*. These notions are explored and executed in this work in terms of credible characters and situations, which is entirely appropriate, since it is a narrative, a work of art. The story of Mahabharata – i.e., the canonical one or any retelling of it - is about “lived dharma” (and by implication, lived adharma). There are many characters in Sarala’s magnum opus which exemplify virtuous living, such as Bhishma, Drona and Karna, among others. They were knowledgeable, mature in understanding and judgement and had a strong ethical sense, and they lived their life
conscientiously. Some of them like Bhishma were wise, in the best sense of the term. But the character that best defines dharma is, unquestionably, Yudhisthira. He was the embodiment of righteousness. In laukika terms, he was the only one who received Krishna’s reverence. Krishna would prostrate at his feet. One must not miss its significance in Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata.

The most notable trait of this character is compassion, compassion that was so deep that it harboured only love and consideration for the other, irrespective of what the other gave, and in this, sometimes Yudhisthira reminds one of the Compassionate One. He wouldn’t hurt a mosquito. If a mosquito bit him, he would gently puff it away. Once a small lizard fell from a tree and was badly hurt. As the seven-year-old Yudhisthira saw it, he stopped playing, and attended to it with utmost care. This act of the seven year old disturbed and disappointed his mother Kunti, who thought that such compassion was undesirable for the one she wanted to be the king. In the Kaurava court the Pandava brothers were insulted, humiliated, and mocked at after Yudhisthira lost his wealth, his and his brothers’ and their wife Draupadi’s independence in the game of dice. Naturally they were filled with helpless rage and Bhima was simply wild. And at that time Yudhisthira’s thoughts were with Dhritarastra. He was worried that Bhima might attack Duryodhana and kill him and his brothers, which would be disastrous for the old blind king: andha raajaa goti mora anastaa hoiba (my blind king will be utterly helpless) (Sabhaa Parva, 470: 344). When the Pandavas were in living in the forest in exile, Duryodhana came, along with his friends, in regal style in order to mock at them, make them feel jealous and suffer the agony of helpless anger as well. On being told about his intentions, the gandharva Chitrasena, who was a friend and a well wisher of the Pandavas, stopped Duryodhana on the way, destroyed his forces, tied him up in his chariot and was carrying him away. Yudhisthira got to know about it. He was not unaware that Duryodhana had come to humiliate him, but that did not affect him. He rather liked to believe that his brother had come to meet him – the brother’s intentions did not matter. So he asked the reluctant Arjuna and Bhima to free him from the gandharva; the supreme consideration was that Duryodhana was their brother. Arjuna protested saying that the gandharva Chitrasena was their cousin, and Bhima said that the gandharva had justly punished him, and was doing what they themselves would have done some day. Yudhisthira told Arjuna that if he did not free Duryodhana, he would commit suicide. In Sarala’s words, tu jebe durjyodhana kain rakshaa na karibu kiriti, yehikshani praana bisarjibi...(Kiriti (another name of Arjuna) if you
will not free Duryodhana, I will commit suicide this very moment…) (*Bana Parva*, 19: 103). He said the same thing many times in many different situations: brother Duryodhana must not be harmed, and if he was, he would not be able to stand the tears of the helpless, blind, old king and would commit suicide. No hurt and harm that the Kaurava brothers caused him and his brothers and Draupadi was too great for him to forget that they were his younger brothers and that their loss would be unbearable for Dhritarastra. On one occasion he even went to the extent of saying that as brother, Duryodhana was dearer to him than Bhima (*Sabhaa Parva*, 442: 27). Incidentally, it would be wrong to say he forgave those who hurt him and harmed him because he did not have the arrogance of forgiving. Besides, forgiving presupposes some wrongdoing that is to be forgiven. In his perspective, what the enemies did to him was only his karma, and his enemies were blameless since they were mere instruments chosen by his karma.

He had decided to fight for his share of the kingdom but he was committed to peace. So when the time came, he asked for just five villages instead of half of the kingdom and was even willing to settle for only one. Without a thought for his safety he went to Duryodhana, for ever his brother, not enemy, in the battlefield itself to make one last effort to avert war. When he failed, he came up with a proposal that was as unexpected as novel. Puranic literature has just no parallel to this. Since the issue concerned Duryodhana and him, he told the Kaurava king, it is they alone who should fight: they, the hundred Kauravas and the five Pandavas. No relatives and friends, and no army should be involved in the fight - the innocents must not die. He wanted the army to leave the battlefield, but Duryodhana didn’t agree. Incidentally, Yudhishthira was not asking for single combat; there could obviously be no single combat-based engagement between a hundred on the one side and five on the other. What he was asking for was restricting the fight strictly to those who had chosen the battlefield to resolve their problem. Kindness, consideration and compassion for the other could hardly go further in a war situation. Looking at it from a different perspective, at one stroke Sarala’s Yudhishthira most emphatically rejected the traditional attitude regarding the soldier’s duty to fight and if necessary die for his king, and all the rest surrounding that notion.
Thus a war was thrust on him. In the war he followed what one might call the yuddha dharma (dharma of war) to the extent he could. Once the actual fighting started, the conduct of the war was not within his control; he was neither the key strategist nor the commander-in-chief of the Pandava army. He fought without hesitation, without any sense of moral insecurity and feeling of guilt. He fought like a kshatriya; he fought to win. He sought from the invincible warriors like Bhishma and Drona the secret of their fall, without of course transgressing the limits of ethical conduct. Despite his assertion – undoubtedly sincere – that he did not want victory at the cost of morals, he found himself doing precisely what he did not want to do. He compromised his integrity when he stooped to tell possibly the most heinous of all lies. That might be just one act of transgression of the moral code, but that single act of adharma was sufficient to reduce his moral stature to that of any other fighter. His was an act of betrayal which was outrageous in the extreme. In order to have Drona, his guru, killed, he told him a lie; he did the unthinkable to Drona, who had implicit trust in his honesty and truthfulness. The story of his ordinariness in moral terms does not end here. When the Pandavas won, he took issue with his brothers, Draupadi, Subhadra and mother Kunti about who must be credited for victory in the war, and asserted that he was in truth the sole cause of victory; he was a steadfast practitioner of dharma, so the Pandavas won. His succumbing to the pressure to tell a lie, his losing his composure after being defeated by his elder brother Karna in the battlefield and his claiming credit for the victory in the war show that he was human after all. After the war was over, he quietly assumed the kingship of Hastinapura. Unlike Vyasa’s Yudhisthira, he was not a sentimental person; he was not overwhelmed with a sense of remorse thinking about the war and did not have to be persuaded to ascend the throne of Hastinapura. He knew it was his duty and his responsibility to rule Hastinapura; it was his raaja dharma. However, if Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata projects him as the embodiment of dharma, it is for his compassionate nature rather than anything else. His compassion, which seems to have remained rather dormant during his practice of yuddha dharma and even raaja dharma, surfaced again when he insisted on taking the dog with him to the land of the gods because it was his companion in the last phase of his lonely journey in the harsh Himalayan mountains.

Terms such as adharma, papa, and their variants, and expressions essentially meaning deviation from dharma, such as the clause dharma langhile ((He) deviated from dharma) are used frequently in the text, and from their use one could acquire an understanding of the
notion of dharma. Papa and its opposite, punya, are related to dharma in an obvious way; thoughts and action deviating from dharma constitute papa and those in consonance with it, punya. Probably the most emphatic statement of the notion of papa in Sarala's *Mahaabhaarata* is in the following: As they faced each other in the battlefield on the penultimate day of the war, Sahadeva told his uncle Sakuni that he should return to his kingdom and rule there now that he had successfully avenged the killing of his father and his relatives. With his goal achieved, the war had become entirely futile for him. Sakuni said that he could not do so because he had committed too many and too grievous sins (*paataaka*): he had given the poisonous sweet to Bhima, built the lac palace to have the Pandavas burnt alive inside, cheated in the game of dice, fanned the hostility of the Pandavas and the Kauravas towards each other and intensified their mutual hatred. He was the one who had got Abhimanyu killed. He accepted almost the entire responsibility for the war in which many great warriors and countless soldiers had perished. Apart from Yudhisthira, he was the only person in whose perspective the ordinary soldiers had a place; no one gave expression to it more emphatically than he did.

Incidentally, on the eve of the war, Krishna too had asked him not to die in the war, but Sakuni had told him essentially the same thing: no matter how justified his revenge was, to him, getting his nephews killed through a war he had manipulated into being was a grievous sin, and sacrificing himself in the battlefield was the only way he could redeem himself.

Thus creating conditions for war, causing the death of the innocents as a result, plotting the death of unsuspecting people and betrayal of trust constitute grave sins in terms of *Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata*. If causing hurt is papa, then compassion, which eliminates the possibility of violence, is dharma. Greatest acts of punya then are acts of compassion. This in fact is the basic content of the notion of dharma as it is explicated in this text.

Taking revenge in itself is not considered to be a sin (papa) in Sakuni’s thinking, in fact, in the thinking of almost all the characters except Yudhisthira. Bhima killed Dussasana and Duryodhana in order to avenge Draupadi’s humiliation, Arjuna killed Jayadratha to avenge the killing of his son Abhimanyu. For these acts of revenge they were not blamed. Leave alone blaming, Krishna justified such acts of revenge. But there is a distinct ambivalence in Sakuni’s attitude to what he did to take revenge, which is not to be found in Bhima and
Arjuna. Their potential victims had been warned in advance. In contrast, Sakuni resorted to treachery, like Duryodhana had. He had his uncle Sakuni’s family killed treacherously in the cruellest manner for no fault of theirs. Sakuni had been advised by his father to take revenge, but not live after achieving his goal since after all, getting one’s nephews killed was a terrible sin, and it had to be paid for in terms of self-sacrifice in the battlefield. This was Sakuni’s view too.

In the context of the war, the term adharma is used to mean violation of war ethics, which had been worked out before the war started by the Pandavas and the Kauravas themselves in the presence of many kings who had gathered to participate in it. Krishna’s presence there had given the code its special sanctity. One prohibition in the code was with respect to the use of divine weapons, which were mostly in the possession of Arjuna, Bhishma, Drona, Karna, and Aswasthama. Use of these weapons was forbidden. When Bhishma took out the divine weapons from his quiver to attack Arjuna, the poet says that he abandoned the path of dharma (chaadile dharma baata) (Bhishma Parva, 295: 76). When Krishna asked Arjuna to attack Karna who was in a helpless position, he was unwilling to do so. Dharma bicaaraku ye na jogai jugati (This is not in consonance with dharma), Arjuna told him. Although not attacking a warrior in that situation was not part of the code as worked out by the adversaries for that war, it was a prohibition sanctioned by tradition. Arjuna subsequently yielded to Krishna’s pressure, as had his eldest brother earlier. But his was clearly an act of adharma and was condemned as such by Kunti later – she used the term paapistha (sinner) for Arjuna for killing Karna - as she was leaving for vaanaprastha.

In the context of dharma, the episode of the fall of the four Pandava brothers and Draupadi in Swargaarohana Parva is of considerable significance. The fall of each of them provided the context for Yudhisthira to spell out the adharma of the one who had just fallen. In those harsh moments when death claimed his wife and brothers one after another, his judgement, as it were, had assumed the finality and the sanctity of the judgement of Dharma himself. He was no ordinary human then; he was the one who death would not be able to claim. As one of them fell, Bhima would implore him to have pity on the dying and stop for a while but he would not. He would merely tell his brother how his or her fall was justified. As Draupadi fell, Yudhisthira said that she was the worst offender (bada dosi) in all that had happened. The Kauravas had humiliated her on account of their ignorance (ajnaana), but her response to
it was vile and vicious. He condemned her for keeping her hair loose for fifteen long years only to tie it up with the blood of a brother. He held her responsible for the death of the Kaurava brothers and the destruction of the lineage. For him, Draupadi’s moral failure lay in her rabid revengefulness. Yudhisthira’s words surprised and shocked Bhima. He suddenly realized that in Yudhisthira’s perception they all were guilty; they all were sinners. For the first time in life, in the midst of the unfriendly mountains and punishing weather, Bhima found himself face to face with the terrible truth about himself, his brothers and their wife. When Sahadeva fell, Yudhisthira charged him of destructive arrogance with regard to the special knowledge he had, namely his ability to look into the past and the future, and held him guilty of being reluctant to share it voluntarily with others. Had he shared his knowledge of what was going to happen, the disaster might have been averted; not sharing knowledge that would have yielded beneficial results was adharma, sinful. He held Nakula guilty of being obsessed with his handsomeness, and Arjuna, of self-praise. Arjuna was boastful too, the eldest Pandava told Bhima, he was never tired of saying how great a warrior he was and how he had defeated the mighty god Shiva himself. Self-praise was dosa or adharma, as was obsession with one’s strengths as it made one arrogant. When Bhima fell, Yudhisthira did not have to tell him anything. At that moment Bhima was too close to death to be able to absorb any truth about himself. In any case, Yudhisthira had already condemned revengefulness, and his brother had not failed to register it.

Moksha is the prime concern of Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata. The words moksha and mukti are often used as variants in this work. The following provides a good example. After the child yogi Manu cursed Jaya and Bijaya, the gate keepers of Vaikuntha, which is Bhagavan Vishnu’s abode, for some misdemeanor the details of which need not detain us now, the chastened ones prayed to the yogi for forgiveness. They appealed to him to tell them how they would get their mukti. The mollified yogi said that they would attain their moksha in three births (Sabhaa Parva, 357: 403). Here the meaning of moksha or mukti seems to be liberation from the cycle of birth and death in the mortal world. It appears that the word mukti is used more frequently than moksha in Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata. However, in the following
instance, *mukti* does not have exactly the same meaning as *moksha*, although the two share the same basic semantic content: *brahmaanku mukati delu* ((You, i.e., Krishna) granted liberation to Brahma). Ignoring details, (Marakanda) Brahma had committed some offence against the child Krishna and was cursed by him: he would remain un-worshipped. Later, mollified by his atonement, Krishna granted it him that in a later yuga he would receive worship in the form of a linga at a certain place. (*Musali Parva, 97: 55, and 98: 58-61*). Here *mukti* has the sense of release from a particular curse. The sense of release from the birth and death cycle in the mortal world is inapplicable here because Brahma does not go through it.

Incidentally in contemporary usage too *moksha* is used in the language in the sense of liberation from the cycle of birth and death. *Mukti* is used in a more general sense. For instance, it occurs in collocations such as *rogaru mukti* (liberation from illness), *daaridryaru mukti* (liberation from poverty), *bhayaru mukti* (liberation from fear), etc. In place of *mukti, moksha* cannot occur in any of these. In *bhava saagararu mukti* (liberation from (the snares of) the world in the sense of sansara), *moksha* can be used in place of *mukti*, but then the phrase becomes inelegant. If *moksha* is used, *bhava saagararu* becomes redundant; it is *mukti* that needs qualification to express the sense of *moksha*.

Now what is moksha in *Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata*? Who attained moksha? What happened to those when they attained moksha? Did they retain their distinct identity in some form? Many questions arise. However, one thing is clear, crystal clear in fact: whoever the poet said attained moksha, attained moksha. There is nothing more to the state of moksha than what all those were said to have attained moksha were in. When we are in the universe of *Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata*, no other notion of moksha is of any relevance, any meaning to us. In the case of Sisupala and Salu (Salwa, in other versions) they were restored to their original form as Jaya and Bijaya and their original position in Vaikuntha. In the case of Bhima’s son, Belalasa (Barbarika (Bhima’s grandson), in some versions of Mahabharata), it was different. After his death, he was absorbed in Krishna. He was decapitated by Krishna with his *sudarsana cakra* before the war started, but on his request and the avatara’s grace, his head remained alive to witness the war. When the Pandavas fought among themselves about who deserved credit for the victory in the Kurukshtera war, Krishna took them to the severed head of Belalasa, who had seen all that had happened. When asked, he said that all he had seen was that a *cakra* (discuss) which shone brighter than millions of suns, was flitting from
one side to the other, mowing down fighters from both sides. His father Bhima was so offended by what he said that he slapped him hard. The head fell lifeless. In the words of the poet, Krishna absorbed Belalasena’s life: se belabalira praana nija ange kale lina ((He) absorbed Belabali’s life breath in his body) (Gadaa Parva, 104: 238). That was Belalasen’s moksha.

Kiratasena, the king of the forest dwellers of Kiskinda, was another person who was beheaded by Krishna. He came along with his son Jara, who was destined to kill Krishna later, to join the war. The Kauravas would not have him on their side, nor would the Pandavas. Being a forest dweller, he was culturally an outsider to the community of the kings who had assembled at Kurukshetra to fight. Krishna knew how great a warrior he was and knew that he could finish the war in no time (which he, the creator and the controller of leela, which is one form of maya - the non-existent existence in one sense - wanted to last for eighteen days, but that is a different narrative). He was worried that he might go to Duryodhana again, who might reconsider his earlier decision and take him in his army. He wanted to do away with that eventuality. He asked him for the daana (ritual gift) of his head, which he gladly offered him. As he sat in meditation thinking of Krishna and Krishna alone, Krishna cut off his head with his cakra and accepted his daana. The severed head did not die, and it requested Krishna to let it live so that it could witness the Kurukshetra war. Krishna placed him on the top of his chariot, Nandighosha, and granted him eternal life. He would remain alive for aeons and aeons, he told him, and seeing him would bring bliss to people: yuga yugaantare thibu ye mohara rathe / tohara murtibanta nare dekhibe samaste (You will be on this chariot of mine for aeons and aeons / People will see you manifest (in this way)) (Bhishma Parva, 89: 65). The poet says that Kiratasena, who was Bali in another birth in another yuga, and had been killed by Rama in that birth, finally received the ultimate grace in the hands of Krishna.

Belalasena and Kiratasena had come to participate in the war but they could not. Now why did their severed heads want to see the war? What charm did the gruesome dance of death have for them? What did it mean for them? The answer might be this: they knew intuitively that the war was a leela of Krishna, and they wanted to see the divine leela unfold – they wanted to see the truth behind the appearance.
But what has the Kiratasena episode got to do with moksha, one might ask. Kiratasena did not seek moksha; neither did Krishna say anything to him about it. But when the avatar sought his head, he felt completely fulfilled. The words mukti and moksha have not been used in the context of Kiratasena in that episode.

But the discourse of moksha in Saaralaa Mahaaabhaarata makes it quite clear that Kiratasena attained moksha. In terms of this narrative, one attained moksha when Krishna killed him with sudarsana cakra. Krishna, with sudarsana cakra, is the most complete avatar of Vishnu, the the avatari. Kiratasena said that he did not “receive” cakra in his earlier existence as Bali. Neither did Ravana and Kumbhakarna in that yuga, who were reborn as Sisupala and Salu. The divine charioteer Matali, who came to transport Sisupala’s soul to Vaikuntha, told him that by being killed by Krishna’s cakra, he had attained moksha (Sabhaa Parva, 359: 428). In the episode on the killing of Jarasandha, as he was fighting Bhima, he, Krishna’s adversary for appearance but his great devotee in reality, was thinking of him and was praying to him inwardly to kill him with his cakra and thereby grant him moksha, rather than have him killed by someone else (Sabhaa Parva I, 66: 307-310). He was musing to himself that he had attacked Krishna eighteen times with the hope that he would kill him with his chakra. Bhishma too was disappointed that Krishna withheld his cakra and thus did not grant him deliverance in the form of a place in Vaikuntha: mukti cintaamani mote sadaye na kalu / mote na maarina kimpe cakra sanharilu (O bestower of deliverance, you were unkind to me / why did you withhold cakra and not kill me?) (Bhishma Parva, 299: 116). In order to force Krishna to kill him with his cakra, on the ninth day of the war, he had attacked Arjuna with divine weapons for which the celebrated archer had no answer. Krishna had intervened and had invoked his cakra to kill Bhishma. Jarasandha and Bhishma were no adversaries of his; they were his devotees. Their unsuccessful efforts to force Krishna to kill them with his cakra shows that moksha could not be manipulated. Being beheaded by Krishna with his cakra is celebrated as the ultimate kripa, grace, in Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata. Kiratasen attained moksha and remained connected with Narayana for aeons and aeons.

Thus in terms of Sarala’s narrative, decapitation by Krishna with his sudarsana cakra alone is what gives moksha, and the word moksha or mukti with the qualification “from sansara (or its equivalent)” expresses the concept of one’s permanent connection with Narayana.
Belalasena is assimilated into Narayana in the form of Krishna, Sisupala and Salu return to Vishnu or Narayana’s abode, Vaikuntha, and Kiratasena remains on the top of Narayana’s chariot. In this way they all remain eternally connected with Narayana. This sense – permanent connection with Narayana - of the word moksha subsumes the sense of liberation from the cycle of birth and death in the mortal world, from the karmic law. Everyone, with arguably one exception, who takes birth in the mortal world, is subject to the karmic law; in fact, one’s very coming into this world is due to one’s karma.

The avatara is the only exception. He does not take birth driven by karma, and although he acts in the world, he remains untouched by the fruit of his action (karma phala). He acts for the fulfillment of his cosmic purpose or for the redemption of the assurances of deliverance he had given to someone in an earlier incarnation (to Jaya and Bijaya, for instance, who were born as Hiranya and Hiranaksha, later Ravana and Kumbhakarna, and then Salu and Sisupala in three succeeding yugas), among such others. His objectives achieved, he merges into the avatari, the Source, and loses his independent identity, as Krishna merged into Vishnu (Musali Parva, 44: 88). Krishna performed karma, but was unaffected by its phala. On a certain occasion the thought crossed Arjuna’s mind that Krishna was not really immune to karma phala, but he instantly and guiltily abandoned that thought as sinful and misleading (Musali Parva, 56-57: 90-94). The doubt had arisen in his mind because Krishna’s body wouldn’t burn despite all effort, but he was soon informed by a voice from the heaven that fire was incapable of consuming that body. This is reminiscent of the arrogant Agni failing to burn a piece of straw in the early days of the creation. Despite his being in the mortal world and participating in its affairs, the avatara is free from the bondages of the world. Moksha and other purusartha’s do not apply to him.

One who is permanently connected with Narayana does not take birth in the mortal world until one’s misdemeanour earns him a curse that sends him there, as it had happened to Jaya and Bijaya. Permanent association with Narayana rules out one’s being a subject to the cycle of birth and death, and one who is free from this cycle, is by implication liberated from the snares, the maya, of worldly existence. This concept of moksha in its popular perception derives a great deal more from the bhakti tradition rather than any other, and Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata celebrates bhakti.
Still on moksha as explicated creatively in this great narrative, attaining it involves being rid of the mortal form. The violence of the process is redeemed by the fact that freed from the limitations of the body, the one who inhabits the body, achieves purity of form: *sudhda sarira* (pure form), as Sankhasura said of it in a different context (*Udyoga Parva*, 390: 64). But then what sense would one make of the severed, but living, heads of Belalasena and Kiratasena? The anomaly is resolved when the living severed head is conceptualized as a qualitatively different form of existence from the normal human body, and such is not subject to the restrictions the latter is. The severed head of Belalasena had achieved purity of vision, with which he saw things that no mortal could. Thus the severed head was no more a *body* in its familiar mortal sense; and freed of karma, it was no more an agent; it was only the pure perceiver.

What did the other living head see from the top of Nandighosha? *Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata* is silent about it. He must have seen what Belalasena saw. Now this particular episode of Belalasena as witness does not occur in most available versions of *Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata*, as Artaballava Mohanty, the editor of the version under study, points out (*Gadaa Parva*, 104: fn.). In such versions then, there is no difference between the state of Belalasena’s head and that of Kiratasena’s head in terms of what one saw or did not see. Both could be presumed to have perceived things in their essential, pure form, but neither shared what they had witnessed with anyone in the mortal world. This is entirely credible: in what form, what language can one express the truth behind all appearances? Didn’t the ancients say that silence is the only language for its articulation?

The severed heads showed continuation of identity of existence in the sense that they were after all the heads of individuals called Belalasena and Kiratasena. His role as witness over, Belalasena was assimilated into the form of Krishna and lost his separate existence and identity. But Kiratasena’s head continued to exist and thus he retained his separate and distinctive identity. Sisupala and Salu lost their mortal identities but assumed their real ones as Jaya and Bijaya. They all got moksha but did not thus exist in the same state.

In *Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata*, moksha is a grace bestowed upon one by Krishna. Therefore who gets it and who does not, does not depend on the beneficiary of his grace. Bhishma craved for moksha, as did Jarasandha, and as did Duryodhana’s son, Laksmana Kumara, all
of whom were his devotees, whether openly or secretly, but none of them received it. In fact, Krishna had granted it to Laksmana Kumara. He had offered him a boon, and in response he asked to be beheaded by him with his sudarsana cakra: ye mohara sira chidu cakrare tohara (May my head be severed by your cakra) (Udyoga Parva, 204: 220). Krishna had granted it to him (Udyoga Parva, 204: 223). This is perhaps the only instance in Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata where Krishna’s given word went in vain. This again is one of the not inconsiderable numbers of instances of inconsistencies in the grand retelling.

In this poet’s narrative, enmity with an avatara or virodha bhakti (devotion through opposition) is projected as the easiest way to attain moksha. The child yogi Manu told Jaya and Bijaya that they would attain moksha in three births if they followed the path of enmity, but a hundred births if they followed the path of bhakti (Sabhaa Parva II, 357: 404-407). This attitude pervades through Sarala’s text. In Udyoga Parva, Sakuni observed that no amount of daana (ritual giving), maana (prestige, honour and reverence), bhakti and jnana would be sufficient to please Narayana (164: 107). Bhishma had felt the same way, as he later told Yudhisthira in the battlefield of Kurukshetra. Sarala, the prachchanna (covert) Viashnava, seems to suggest that one becomes Krishnamaya (filled with Krishna (consciousness)) more easily through hatred than through love mixed with reverence.

But neither Belalasena nor Kiratasena were hostile to Krishna, let alone be obsessed with hatred and enmity towards him. On the contrary, they had a devotee’s attitude to him. When they met Krishna in that decisive occasion in their life, they didn’t seek moksha from him. In fact, they did not ask him for anything; it was he who asked them for their head and received their daana. This is reminiscent of the Bali and Vamana - Dwarf avatar - episode. Bali did not seek anything from Vishnu; it was Vishnu as Vamana who sought daana from him. However, Vamana could not just take a daana from him, through which he sent him to the nether worlds, and leave; in the Kaurava court, as Bhishma pointed out, he compensated him in abundant measure (Udyoga Parva, 156: 1-2). Similarly here Belalasena and Kiratasena attained moksha because Krishna too could not receive their ultimate daana without compensating them.

Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata is a bhakti purana. Staying associated with Krishna, i.e., Narayana, is the ultimate wish of a devotee, whichever form of devotion he might practice,
and with whatever name that state of existence might be called: moksha or whatever else. For many, including warriors like Bhurishrava or Sakuni and the Kaurava elders such as Bhishma and Dhritarastra, simply looking at Krishna as one lay dying in the Kuruksetra battlefields was sufficient to attain Vaikuntha. Here the bhakta mattered; the object of his bhakti did not, in the sense that whether Krishna looked at, or took cognizance of, the dying man was of no consequence. Such an idea represents the supremacy of the bhakta over bhagawan (here, the Supreme Being), which is arguably the ultimate statement of the bhakti approach. At one stage Bhishma wished for death in the battlefield with his gaze fixed on Krishna. Before the start of the war, Bhurishrava said it for everyone who had come to participate in the war that they had come to look at Krishna while dying fighting since this would give them the ultimate liberation: jujhibun padibu aambhe ye mahaabhaaratha samare / sankha cakra cinha dekhi labhibun krushnara angare ((We) will fight and fall in this Mahabharata war / (We) will merge in Krishna’s form by looking at the marks of the divine conch and discuss (on him)) (Bhishma Parva, 11: 55, 59-60). As he was fleeing from the battlefield, Duryodhana went to meet his father, and Dhritarastra reprimanded him for not falling in the battlefield looking at Krishna’s face: krushna mukha cahin re na delu rane jhaasa / sabunti maraailu yekaa jibane kalu aasa (You didn’t sacrifice your life in the war field looking at Krishna’s face / having got everyone killed you wanted to save your own life) (Gadaa Parva, 27: 59).

A discussion of moksha in Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata would remain incomplete without reference to the sawara Jara, a forest dweller. Jara’s story in Sarala’s narrative is a little purana within a purana. No one in Sarala’s narrative, not excluding Arjuna, was more closely associated with Krishna than Jara. Unlike in Vyasa’s Mahabharata, his story here does not end with shooting and mortally wounding Krishna with his arrow; in fact, it begins here.

Jara was overwhelmed with grief and cursed himself when he found out that it was not the ear of a deer but a foot of Krishna at which he had directed his arrow. At Krishna’s advice he went to Hastinapura to bring Arjuna there. Krishna pleaded with Arjuna to touch him, begged him to touch him but he would not oblige. All he was willing to do was allow him to touch one end of his bow. Through that touch Krishna withdrew his aspect from him, and with that ended his avataric presence. Arjuna in futile anger fought to kill Jara but utterly failed. They both were advised by the voice from the sky to abandon fighting. Then they together tried to
cremate Krishna’s body, but it would not burn. At the advice of the voice from the sky again, they floated the body in the sea.

With his purana-making creativity Sarala linked Krishna with Jagannatha, the presiding deity in the temple that bears his name. In this temple at Puri in coastal Odisha, Jagannatha is worshipped with Balabhadra, Subhadra and Sudarshana, who are popularly believed to be representations of Krishna, his brother Balarama, their sister Subhadra, and Narayana’s chakra. However, in terms of Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata, Jagannatha is Krishna, i.e. Narayana, Balabhadra, Shiva, and Subhadra, Brahma, whose feminine form is due to a curse. Sarala’s story of Krishna and Jagannatha is long and complex, and there is no need to go into it here. It is Jara’s relationship with Krishna alone that concerns us now.

Vyasa told Yudhisthira in Sarala’s narrative that his being fatally wounded by Jara actually amounted to Krishna’s having bestowed his grace on him: *jebana jaraa sawara kalaa sastraghaata / taahaakain anugraha kale jagannaatha* (Jara, who had wounded (Krishna) with his weapon / Jagannatha (i.e., Krishna) bestowed a favour on him = Krishna actually granted a favour to Jara, who had wounded him). Later Krishna in his pure form appeared before Jara and told him that he would manifest himself as a stone *murti* (form) and would bear the name Nilamadhava, and that he would receive worship from him alone. A king called Indradyumana was a great devotee of Vishnu, and he had heard of Nilamadhava and had most devoutly wished to worship him. He even had built a temple for him but had no knowledge of where he could find the *murti*. Brahma as Markandeswara told the king that he should befriend Jara and ask him about Nilamadhava. This was what Indradyumana did.

One day Krishna told Jara that he would emerge as a *daaru* (ambiguous between the meanings of “tree” and its “trunk” from which the *murtis* are made, in the context of Jagannatha worship), at a certain place on the following day and that he must share this information with king Indradyumana. The following day everyone saw the supremely majestic *daaru* at the designated place, which appeared to everyone as a red sandal wood tree. Jara said it was the body of Krishna himself. All efforts to move the great *daaru* from that place into the temple failed, and then Krishna told the king in a dream that only Jara, the sawara, and Basu, the brahmana, could together move the tree. Soon after, as Jara and Basu were moving the *daaru*, they, from two different cultures, happily exchanged pleasantries and
jokes: *sabara brahmana je aneka pirati* (there was a lot of goodwill between the forest dweller and the brahmin), as Sarala put it. This marked a significant stage in the process of the forest dweller’s god moving out of the profound seclusion of the forest. It was as though Krishna had withdrawn himself into the depths of the forest as Nilamadhava and came out of it as *Maha Daaru* (the supreme *daaru*).

Today one would be tempted to treat this story as a fictional representation of the process of brahminization of the tribal god, and some might view it as part of the brahminical conspiracy to stifle the tribal culture. But this is not how Sarala viewed it. He was not judgemental about it at all. As the narrator, with the attitude of a devotee, he was simply narrating Krishna’s cosmic play, *leela*, as he saw it.

Once the trunk was in the temple, the concern was about who would make the *murti*. The distraught king meditated on Krishna, who told him that Jara would carve out the form in which he would be worshipped. So the temple was closed with only Jara inside so that he could work in complete secrecy. But he had absolutely no idea about how to make the *murti*, so the creator god Brahma himself arrived and the *murtis* of Jagannatha, Balabhadra and Subhadra were made. Brahma then assimilated into the form of Subhadra.

This is where Jara’s story ends in *Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata*. Krishna had said earlier that Jara’s descendants would worship him in the form he would assume in Kali yuga. Now both they and the brahmin Basu’s descendants would worship the deities. Balabhadra asked Jara to ensure that Yama must not enter Niladri kshetra, the seat of the temple. There is no further mention of him in the narrative.

Sarala does not tell us when and how Jara passed away. He surely did not die a spectacular death like his father Kiratasena, or Belalasena or Sisupala. His name was Jara (old); perhaps – quite appropriately - he died of old age. One does not know whose face he was looking at as he was dying, and who filled his consciousness in those last moments of his life. One does not know what happened to him after he passed away, where - to which *loka* - he went and what form he took. Did he merge with Narayana or live in Vaikuntha? Or still in the cycle of life and death, did he take birth again, as his own descendant, to worship Krishna, who had chosen to receive worship from him, in the form of Jagannatha? As Sakuni and Bhishma had
said, Narayana is always unsatisfied. If he wanted worship from Jara, there is no telling how many lifetimes of worship he would want from him. Or no more in that cycle, did he continue live through his descendants – “live” in the present day genetic sense? In short, did he or did he not get moksha in the sense of *Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata?* In the context of Jara, the poet does not use either moksha or mukti from *bhava saagara* or some such near equivalent expression like “going to Vaikuntha”.

Jara had no feeling of enmity towards Krishna. When his father was beheaded by Krishna, he quietly returned to his dwelling in the forest, as though his father had died a natural death, if our interpretation of the relevant couplet is correct (*Bhishma Parva*, 89:67). There is not even the faintest suggestion in the text that he bore a grudge against Krishna and that he wanted to avenge the death of his father. Whatever was the destiny’s role in that fatal happening, as far as he was concerned, it was by sheer mistake that he had shot his lethal arrow at Krishna’s foot. He knew who Krishna was; he knew that Krishna was the one whose name was taken with devotion by Brahma, Indra and Shiva, as Sarala put it (*Musali Parva*, 36: 86). But he was not really a devotee in terms of *navadha bhakti* (nine modes of devotion) or in some popular sense of this notion. However, if knowledge – in his case, intuitive and tacit knowledge - of the real nature of Krishna was bhakti, then of course he was a *bhakta* par excellence.

Jara did not ever seek connection with Krishna, let alone crave for it. Neither did Krishna, his, during his lifetime. In contrast, he had sought Arjuna’s companionship, and looking at Arjuna, he had given up his mortal form. Jara never asked Krishna for anything, unlike Bhishma, or the Pandavas, among many, many others. Such a thing never even occurred to him. He must have considered himself too insignificant to even ask him for anything.

The fatal arrow changed relationships. Krishna withdrew his attribute (*kalaa*) from Arjuna, and sought Jara’s company – as Nilamadhava, he would accept worship from Jara alone, his *daaru* would be carried by him, he would make his *vigraha* or *murti*, and as Jagannatha he would receive worship from his descendants, as though through them he would feel the presence of Jara. Jara neither expected nor sought any of these. He didn’t seem to see any of these as a privilege given to him by Narayana himself. He was totally unaffected by all the honour and importance that the king and the royal priest accorded to him on account of his
being the primary receiver of Krishna’s grace. If at any time he had the knowledge that he was a special person on that account, nothing in his thought or conduct gave even the faintest hint of it. His father Kiratasena and Belalasena both had offered their heads as daana to Krishna, but each had wanted a favour from him, namely to live to see the war. Every bhakta wants something: prosperity in terms material or spiritual, grace, moksha, Bhagawan himself, as the gopis did. Krishna wanted so much from Jara, but Jara didn’t ask him for anything. He only did whatever Krishna wanted him to do. Not happily, not grudgingly, not with a sense of fulfillment, not with any motive, or a sense of duty, an obligation towards the one he had wronged, nothing! And as for his doing things for Krishna, there was no feeling of agency in him at all.

In all likelihood the taatwikas (seekers of knowledge, but here roughly, scholars) might argue that Jara represented the true devotee, the devotee of the highest kind, who is spiritually completely empty and is thus completely ready to receive whatever is given him by God. Although a plausible position, it is not very clear that Sarala intended to project this view of bhakti through Jara. Like many writers, Sarala sometimes used the narrator’s comment as a means to state his position. In Shaanti Parva, Sarala observed that demons such as Hiranya, Hiranaksha, Ravana and Kumbhakarna, among others, and humans such as Sisupala and Salu, etc., who were inimical to Vishnu, attained moksha. They were all filled with Krishna consciousness on account of their intense hatred for him: krushnaku maaribe boli karithaanti laye / tenukari samaste hoile bishnumaye (they were all focused on killing Krishna / therefore they all became full of Krishna) (6: 74). There are no comparable narrator observations on Jara’s bhakti, and no celebration or projection of it in the narrative.

Nothing including their past associations from the time of Rama avatara explains Krishna’s grace for Jara. It is beyond reasoning, and it renders the question whether Jara deserved his grace entirely meaningless, if such a question is meaningful at all. For once Sarala did not try to explain a surprising element, namely the relationship between Krishna and Jara in his story with reference to past existences and past karma or in any other way.

So perhaps the Jara episode does not add to our understanding of the meaning of moksha as it is used in Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata, namely, being permanently connected with Narayana, freed from the limitations of the mortal form. But this episode does seem to suggest that
moksha is not all, that there are states of being higher, at least other (to avoid a futile confrontation with the taatwikas) than moksha, unthought of by the theory of purusartha. However, in the absence of any clear narrator observations in this regard, and considering that Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata is avowedly concerned about moksha, one wonders if this episode is not an example of the creation getting out of the creator’s control and acquiring a meaning that its creator did not intend to give it. In Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata moksha was what humans sought from Krishna and what Krishna gave Jara was himself, perhaps more completely than he had to anyone in the entirety of bhakti literature, including the gopis. It seems that the one who gets is the one who never seeks, never asks for. But who knows - the relationship between nara and Narayana is never without an element of mystery.
THE THIRD ESSAY

When it comes to Mahabharata, it is like someone, call him X, retelling the story of the Bharata dynasty, more specifically, the story of the Kurus, which he had heard from someone else, call him Y. And Y had heard the story from A. No point in asking who A had heard the story from since one can go on and on backwards in this way. Many nameless rivulets, many nameless mountain springs converge and a river is made and the river gets a name. For many many years - no one knows how many - hundreds and hundreds of kathas (folk tales) told again and again in the villages and in the capitals by storytellers and innumerable songs and ballads sung by bards in the service of kings and by wandering minstrels in many kingdoms were, we can imagine, creatively woven together by some remarkable genius, and the great composition, which has come to be known as the Mahabharata, came into being. In the memory of an ancient people this celebrated genius was Vyasa, a sage and a poet. Only a poet who was a sage could have composed such a narrative, so went the belief. Thus Vyasa is the author of a truly authorless story. And we say Sarala reconceptualized and retold Vyasa’s story.

As Sarala reconceptualized the story of Mahabharata some new situations emerged, some familiar events took a somewhat different form, some new characters arrived, some familiar characters looked pretty unfamiliar, and as a consequence, there arose some fascinating complications in the story, which had to be resolved in a manner that met the demands of this re-conceptualized narrative. While on his pilgrimage with his brothers and their wife
Draupadi after handing over the kingdom to his grandson, Parikshita, Yudhisthira was requested by the Odia trader Hari Sahu to marry his daughter, Suhani, who was destined to die during her wedding. And his brothers told an unwilling Yudhisthira that it would be unethical to turn down Sahu’s appeal. Thus the unexpected happened: the eldest Pandava, in his old age, married again. At Draupadi’s swayamvara, Bhurisrava, Bhishma, and guru Drona were present to participate in the archery test and win Draupadi, not of course for themselves, but for Duryodhana. In fact, Karna, Drona and Bhurisrava actually tried and failed. Bhishma had already lifted the bow when his eyes fell on Shikhandi. He put it down and returned to his seat (Aadi Parva II, 816-819). Not that he would have succeeded had he shot the arrow. Krishna had rigged the test in order to ensure Arjuna’s success, which only Brahma knew in heaven and the sage Vyasa on earth (Aadi Parva, 807:373). Of the characters not found in the canonical version, Suhani is possibly the most prominent, ignoring those in Musali Parva, since this part of the narrative is primarily about Krishna and hardly about the Kuru. Hidimbaki, Bhima’s first wife, an asuri and a forest dweller, and Draupadi met and cursed each other’s children: Draupadi cursed Ghatotkacha, and Hidimbaki cursed Draupadi’s children, yet to be born. The story resolved the situation by getting the mighty Ghatotkacha killed in a manner disgraceful for the kshatriyas, and by making the children of Draupadi easy targets for Aswasthama’s sword, as they were fast asleep when their assassin arrived in their tent in the thick darkness of the night. Thus they too died a death unworthy of the kshatriyas.

It is primarily characters of this type, half ignored and only partially developed, that can sometimes be particularly fascinating. These are the characters that remain mostly in the periphery of the story. Once in a while the narrator brings such a character to the centre but soon sends him away to the periphery. There are indeed many of these in any version of the Mahabharata story; in fact, too many, and they have suffered double neglect for centuries – first in the hands of the storyteller and then in the minds of the millions and millions of people over hundreds of years who listened to the narrative or read it. Let alone Suhani, Subhadra, Hidimbaka and her son Ghatotkacha, even the far more visible characters such as Balarama, Dhritarashtra, Dussasana, Vidura, Drona, Aswasthama, Drupada, and even Bhishma have engaged the listeners and readers only to a limited extent. These are the most visible “characters-on-periphery”. These are not among the characters that have crucially contributed to the development of the story, despite the pervasive presence of some of them in it:
Bhishma, Drona, and Vidura, among others. The neglected always deserve or should deserve attention. That apart, in a puranic narrative like the Mahabharata, where there are scores and scores of characters, the way the storyteller deals with his minor characters often provides good evidence of his creativity. These characters also contribute to the unfolding of the writer’s vision; furthermore, by handling them imaginatively the narrator often increases the appeal of the narrative. We discuss some of these characters here.

We begin with Balarama. He was an avatar as was Krishna. Knowing this, however, we choose to adopt the laukika perspective to deal with this character. Admittedly this approach is too limited, rather misleading and perhaps irrelevant, to deal with an avatar, but it is undoubtedly interesting for its human interest value. Balarama is marginalized in the canonical text and in all versions of it in Odia as well; in fact, we might safely presume it to be the case in any version in any language. With his fondness for Duryodhana and his refusal to take sides between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, when Krishna’s affection and unqualified support were reserved for the Pandavas, he had to be marginalized in the narrative.

In Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata there is nothing about Balarama’s Brindavan-Mathura phase. There is no context for it. As for the same phase of Krishna’s life, there is just one short episode, in which Krishna made wild love to an old attendant of Radha, without even caring to know whether it was really Radha he was making love to, so great was his longing for her and so impatient was he for her. Their child became an accomplished thief in due course, having received training from Krishna himself for that profession. He turned out to be useful for the story. Vidura needed someone to dig an underground tunnel secretly through which the Pandavas would escape from the lac house, and it was this son of Krishna who did that job for him wonderfully well. When we see Krishna and Balarama in their Dwaraka-Hastinapura phase they were together, and yet not together. They had become different persons with different attitudes and temperaments. In brief, Balarama was impulsive, whereas Krishna was composed, cautious and calculating; Balarama was generally uninterested and
aloof about things, whereas there was nothing that happened in which Krishna was not involved. In this phase, it was Arjuna who had taken the place of Balarama in Krishna’s scheme of things. This is yet another important cause of the marginalization of Balarama in the Mahabharata story. He could be unpredictable. The supremely powerful and somewhat wild Balarama was accorded reverence, but was kept out of everything. He reminds one of the Vedic Rudra, who was revered by everyone, but was never invited to a sacrifice.

The education of the Pandava and the Kaurava princes was over, and the former had given the desired guru daksina to Drona. That was when one day Balarama told Krishna that he wanted to see for himself how good their education was. That was how Balarama met the princes for the first time. It was also the first time that Krishna met the Kaurava princes. He had already met the first three Pandavas; Nakula and Sahadeva were not born by then. When they met the Kuru princes, the Pandavas prostrated themselves at Balarama’s feet. Krishna paid his obeisance to Yudhisthira and received his blessings. But the Kaurava princes did not pay due respects to Balarama and Krishna: raamakrushnaku namaskaara na kale kurubire kehi (None of the Kuru warriors paid obeisance to Balarama and Krishna) (Aadi Parva I, 362: 43). Balarama was a stickler for decency and good manners, but on this occasion, for some unclear reason, he did not seem to mind the princes’ rank bad manners. On a later and critical occasion when the same thing happened with the Pandavas and Duryodhana behaving in the same asymmetrical manner, he did, and he said so in no unclear language. On that occasion, it may be recalled, Duryodhana paid dearly for Balarama’s displeasure (Gadaa Parva, 90: 66-90).

Anyway, on being asked what all they had learnt from Drona, the Pandava and the Kaurava princes demonstrated their skills to Balarama in using various weapons, including bow and arrows. At the end Balarama observed that they needed to improve their skill in the use of the mace. He himself then showed them a bit of his skill with that weapon. Incidentally, at that time he was known to be one of the two most skilful wielders of this weapon, Jarasandha being the other. Duryodhana was highly impressed and implored him to accept him as his pupil. A generous teacher, Balarama readily consented. Arjuna told him that he would not learn from him because going to a second guru would not be an ethical act. Balarama didn’t mind; whosoever wanted to learn from him must go to his training place everyday, he told them, and left with his brother Krishna.
Thus it was that the Kaurava princes became his shishyas. Duryodhana excelled, and that was probably how Balarama developed a fondness for him. It was a teacher’s affection for a brilliant student, his best student, and it is reminiscent of Drona’s for his best pupil Arjuna, only that Drona’s affection was considerably deeper. It was for his fondness for Duryodhana that he did not like to see him humiliated; so he told Krishna that they should leave Draupadi’s swayambara when he realized that the Pandavas in the garb of brahmins were going to hand the Kauravas a humiliating defeat: balaraame boile hari dwaarakaa caala jibaa / dhrutaraastra puankara kasta na dekhibaa (Let us go to Dwaraka, O Hari, Balarama said / Let us not see the suffering of Dhritarastra’s sons) (Aadi Parva II, 874:844). But then this teacher’s affection did not ever translate into an attachment that led to either his blind support for or his protection of him in any situation and at any cost. He was not there at the time of his marriage or his coronation. Incidentally, he was not there at Yudhisthira’s coronation either, but he was happy about the event. He received no favour from Duryodhana. He might or might not have been fond of good food but he certainly did not ever choose to dine with Duryodhana for reasons of good food. On the contrary, he looked after his dear pupil very well when he visited Dwaraka. In any case he was not the one who could be pleased with such trivialities as food and drink. On that occasion of their first meeting with the princes, Krishna had food in Kunti’s house, and all Sarala says about Balarama’s food is that he was the one who carried snakes on his head and lived on air.

There was nothing Balarama would hide from Krishna, and there was very little Krishna would share with his doting elder brother. Greatly concerned about the threat to his sons’ lives from Bhima, when they were still children, Dhritarashtra prayed to Balarama to protect them. He assured him of his protection in impulsive language; “from today they are my sons”, he said. And he readily informed Krishna about it when he returned to Dwarka (also Dwarika, in Sarala’s composition) . Now Krishna immediately informed Arjuna and warned him not to trust Dhritarashtra. Arjuna made a confrontational remark, disrespectful of Balarama; he said, so long as the Pandavas enjoyed Krishna’s protection, he wouldn’t be worried about a “lakh of Balaramas”. Krishna was pleased at his confidence is all that the poet says about his response (Aadi Parva, 438-440). Now, no one would have been able to make such a remark about Krishna in the presence of Balarama and got away with it.
Balarama was not a simpleton; Krishna called him parama yogi (great yogi) (Musali Parva, 21: 96), and bhuta bhavishya jnaataa (knower of the past, and the future) (Aadi Parva, 806: 364). He was simple, unsuspecting and uncomplicated in his understanding of and approach to things. Unless evidence was compelling enough to raise doubts, he would take things on their face value. He was very distressed when he heard that the Pandavas and their mother had been consumed by fire. Krishna was weeping inconsolably, but he was pretending. The unsuspecting Balarama did not see through it, and he with Krishna set out for Hastinapura in order to console Dhritarashtra. Once he saw the charred bodies, which he took to be the Pandavas’ and Kunti’s, Balarama was certain that the unfortunate event had taken place. He couldn’t have any doubts, after seeing the way Krishna had wept.

He was angry, offended, and hurt when he discovered during Draupadi’s swayambhara that Krishna had lied to him and had kept him in the dark about the Pandavas. He chided him; he said he was his elder brother and his very own, and yet he had deceived him. Saying that he would not see his face again, he walked off, but soon returned, thinking that this might be incorrectly interpreted as his hostility towards the Pandavas. It was not the case at all that he was afraid of the Pandavas’ displeasure; he did not want to appear partial towards the Kauravas. In fact, he was not. In any case, this was not the last time that Krishna had cheated his indulgent, forgiving brother. However, it was not every time that Balarama could be deceived.

Balarama arrived in the Kurukshetra battlefield when Duryodhana invoked his presence there. Bhishma had asked him to inform Balarama that his younger brother had violated the word he had given him, and participated in the war in favour of the Pandavas. When an angry Balarama confronted Krishna, he told him that Bhishma’s charges were false. Balarama asked those who were there whether they had seen his brother wielding a weapon. No one said that he had seen a weapon in Krishna’s hand. Balarama was embarrassed and rebuked Bhishma. And he advised Duryodhana to stop fighting and make peace with the Pandavas, an advice that Duryodhana flatly rejected - right on his face.

At that point of time in the battlefield, in that specific context of his arrival there, that advice might have looked out of place. However, Balarama’s advice should have surprised none. He had always thought that it was a purposeless war. But surely no one suspected that there
could be something deeper in Balarama’s advice. There indeed was. He had fathomed what had happened. Sarala unfolded the truth for his audience. Later that night when they were alone, Balarama told Krishna that he knew that he had lied to him. He said he was aware that he would intervene in the war in favour of the Pandavas again and again, and that Duryodhana would complain to him each time this happened. And he did not want any situation where he would be constrained to confront him. He said he was going on pilgrimage from there itself. This was an act of utter helplessness. He had been let down by his brother and now, his best pupil. He was disappointed. In the narrative his marginalization was complete.

Krishna had promised that he would not participate in the war. He would only witness it as Arjuna’s charioteer, and thereby purify himself of all the sins he had committed: *sri mahaabhaarata juddha dekhile paapa karibi binasyati* (Witnessing the Mahabharata war (I) will destroy my sins) (*Udjoga Parva*, 216: 86). War was *yajna* (ritual sacrifice); *rana jaaga*, as Sarala puts it, and therefore witnessing it would be spiritually purifying. It was only then that Balarama did not object to his going to the battlefield.

Krishna had already told him that since both the Pandavas and the Kauravas wanted him, he should be with those whose invitation had arrived first. Duryodhana had arrived first in Dwaraka, he was told; thus the first invitation was from him, but Krishna was not aware of his having arrived. Now an invitation is no invitation if the invited person does not know of it, which is not a bad argument when one has no access to the intentions of the speaker or has no doubts about the honesty of his intentions. He told his brother that he had seen Arjuna before he saw Duryodhana, so as far as he was concerned, Arjuna’s was the invitation he had received first. On the following day, Balarama called Krishna to his presence and not mincing words, told him, in front of both Duryodhana and Arjuna, that the brothers were fighting a futile war, and that it would be improper for them to take sides in that war. It was then that Krishna made his promise to Balarama.

What explains Balarama’s stand? The poet does not make it very clear; so one can only guess. He never asked the Kauravas or the Pandavas not to go to war; in fact, no one had sought his opinion on the matter either. But if there was something he felt strongly about, he was not the kind of person who would wait for an invitation to offer his views and advice.
Both the Pandavas and the Kauravas seemed to have thought it unnecessary to consult him on the question of war, assuming that he would go by whatever Krishna decided, whether he liked it or not, and would join whichever side Krishna decided to join. That apart, Balarama was the kind of person who would not ordinarily like to get involved in other people’s affairs; the Pandavas and the Kauravas were not part of his family; they were only relatives – still “the other”. Krishna was his brother, so he told him what was right for him to do and what he must do. Incidentally, Krishna was the only person who had sought his advice. It is another matter that Balarama would have told him what to do, even if he had not sought his advice.

Balarama was not against war as such; what he probably was against was war in the family. Being in a state of intoxication quite often, he could fly into a rage, and then he could be impetuous. Once he was going to drown the entire Hastinapura – the Pandavas, Kauravas, and everyone else, including his nephew, Krishna’s son, Samba, who was in Duryodhana’s custody. The provocation was that the Kaurava king – his favourite pupil - had decided to punish Samba for his misdemeanor (Madhya Parva II, 614-627). It did not occur to Balarama that if he drowned Hastinapura, then his nephew, whose release he wanted, would also drown. Krishna had to say it to him. His appeal and his logic both calmed Balarama. When it came to the Kurukshetra war, he was clear in his mind that neither he nor Krishna should take part in it. Krishna could go only as a non-participating witness. Balarama thought it was a pointless war; from his point of view, there could never be enough justification for a war in the family, a point of view that invites comparison with Yudhisthira’s. There may be another way of looking at Balarama’s stand. In all probability he was really anxious about the Kauravas since he knew his brother. He did not like to see Duryodhana in misery. Although anything could happen in a war, he must have thought that with Krishna’s presence in the battlefield on the side of the Pandavas, there was little possibility of just anything happening.

There was a fundamental difference between Krishna and Balarama. Krishna was working for the establishment of a political order, which would be based on moral values and justly sustained by a virtuous ruler, and for this to happen, he was prepared to take recourse to even low manipulations and unethical practices, if found absolutely necessary. The change that he would bring about would see the elimination of not only the Kauravas but also many others, including such powerful rulers as Jarasandha, Salwa, Sishupala, Salya, Drupada, Jayadratha and Karna, and many other non-kshatriya centers of power, including guru Drona, his son.
Aswasthama, and Krupacharya. Balarama did not have any such agenda. He was just not interested in the other. He would not interfere with others’ affairs; neither would he allow others to interfere with his (i.e., his family’s, which, needless to say, included Krishna). A man of great integrity, he was transparent and spontaneous, and he disliked manipulations and cunning. He could not be pushed around. Krishna could persuade an unwilling Arjuna to kill Karna when the latter was in a disadvantageous position in the battlefield and an even more unwilling Yudhisthira to tell a half-truth – what is a lie if a half-truth is not - to upset his guru Drona and be the cause of his death. But he would never have been able to persuade Balarama to do something mean to defeat an enemy; the Pandavas depended on Krishna, Balarama did not in the same sense. It was not that Krishna did not have his way with Balarama, but his method was very different – in brief, he overtly or covertly appealed to his elder brother’s indulgence towards him. In any case, given his nature, Balarama would have no place in Krishna’s great design. It is as though simple, believing, honest, and forthright people have no role at critical times when a great transformation was being planned. Therefore Balarama had to be pushed to the periphery in the Mahabharata narrative.

It is tempting to compare Balarama with Yudhisthira in the context of the fratricidal engagement on the Kuruksetra battlefield. Yadavas did not fight such a war. Not that there were no differences between Krishna and Balarama. On several occasions Balarama discovered that Krishna had cheated him. One particularly telling example has already been mentioned: Krishna’s intervention in the war, unseen by anyone, in the form of destroying Bhishma’s infallible celestial weapon. Instead of challenging his errant brother, Balarama withdrew from the scene. He was terribly embarrassed, to say the least, in their sister Subhadra’s wedding. He wanted to punish Arjuna who had eloped with the Yadava princess. But when he realized that Krishna had orchestrated it, he consented to the wedding. He was extremely indulgent towards his younger brother; as far as his brother’s doings were concerned, there was no limit to his tolerance. There was nothing that Krishna could do which he could not forgive. He was completely ego-less with respect to his brother. With an elder brother like him, there was no possibility of a vicious fight with the younger brother.

Yudhisthira was very much like Balarama with respect to his attitude towards his younger brother. He did not look on Duryodhana as his cousin; he was his brother. Incidentally, Odia does not have two distinct words for cousin and brother; it has just one word bhaai. Without
qualification, *bhaai* is brother, with appropriate qualification, cousin. For example, Duryodhana was Yudhisthira’s *badabaapaa pua bhaai* (father’s elder brother’s son brother, i.e., cousin), whereas Arjuna was his *bhaai*. But the same term *bhaai* would be used for purposes of call and address in the case of both the brother and the cousin. Now, for Yudhisthira, Duryodhana was not just *bhaai* for such linguistic purposes alone, he was his *bhaai* in terms of good will and affection he had for him; he did not distinguish between him and his own brothers. Duryodhana’s hostility and ill will towards the Pandavas was no secret to him, but that did not change his attitude towards him. In terms of Sarala’s narrative, he appears to be temperamentally a person who would not have hesitated in the least to renounce his right to the throne of Hastinapura in favour of Duryodhana and retired to the forest.

But he did not, and fought a fratricidal war. He looked destined to do so. His destiny was in the form of the situation in which he was placed. It was very different from Balarama’s. When the time came to decide on a conclusive war, Yudhisthira was never free to take the decision. He was under direct or indirect pressure from Draupadi, Kunti, Sahadeva and Krishna. Each one of them wanted war. Then there were the terrible oaths of Bhima.

Returning to Balarama, who, as we know, was dispatched to the periphery in the narrative, was indeed accorded dignity at a later stage in the same. For a moment – and only for that moment – he was brought to the centre. It is an altogether different thing that nothing changed in the least as a consequence of this in the lives of the Mahabharata characters or in the state of things in the kingdom. But at the same time from the point of view of the narrative, it is not inconsequential. When Krishna, the avatara, met Vishnu, the avatari, Arjuna was with him. Vishnu chided Krishna for not having brought Balarama to his presence. “You brought Arjuna, why didn’t you bring Balarama?” he asked him. As though to show Krishna his place, he said that he was the manifestation of a hair of his body, of a wish of his. Balarama and he were his *ansas* (fractions). He sternly directed Krishna to return to his celestial abode along with Balarama. He mentioned Balarama fondly throughout. And completely ignored Arjuna, the Nara part of Krishna-Narayana.
To talk about Dhritarashtra, we might begin from the end. In the swarga loka, the abode of the devas, Yudhisthira saw his brothers, Duryodhana and his brothers, Bhishma, Drona, Salya, Sakuni, Sanjaya, Ghatotkacha, Abhimanyu, Birata, Drupada, thousands of kings and millions of soldiers, who all had fallen in the battlefield of Kurukshetra, the spouses of these warriors, and his Odia wife, Suhani. In this context Sarala makes a special mention of Dhritarashtra. The one person Yudhisthira did not see was Dhritarashtra: *yekaa maatra dhrutiraastrakayin na dekhi pratakshe* (The only one (I) did not see was Dhritarashtra) (*Swargaarohana Parva*, 236: 1892).

Perhaps his karma had taken him to some other *loka* (habitation) – some inferior *loka* as suggested by the tone of Sarala’s reference to him in this context. In many ways he was unfortunate. He was born of a union into which his mother, Ambika, had been forced. She died while giving birth to him. He was born blind, and the royal family was terribly disappointed. Later he disappointed many, including the family elders. He was considered unworthy of the throne – a blind king would not enjoy the confidence of his subjects as he would not be able to make them feel confident about their protection in the kingdom. The general assessment of him can be summed up in these two words of sage Agasti: *adakshya* (incompetent) and *ajogya* (*ayogya*, unworthy). This is what the great sage had told Pandu on a certain occasion about his elder brother (*Aadi Parva* I, 169: 28). As Dhritarashtra grew up, he became intensely aware of his inadequacies, and not unjustifiably, considered himself a victim of destiny. As soon as a princess got engaged to him, she died. He had to be married to a princess who was born with a comparable fate – every prince she had got engaged to, had died. It is imaginable that these too had an impact on Dhritarashtra’s mind, but on this point, Sarala is silent. Besides it must have been very depressing for Dhritarashtra to be told right on his face by the elders of his family that he was the king by the generosity of his younger brother, and not to be able to express even his resentment at this.

But life was not without blessings for the blind king. Vyasa’s blessings had given him a strong and powerful body, and an inner vision, a special power to see (*divya cakshyu*). Everything was visible to him if he looked within: *garvaku caahinle taaku disai samasta* (if he looked within, everything was visible to him) (*Aaadi Parva* I: 96: 9). He received the best available education both on dharma and weaponry. The Kuru elders Santanu, Bhishma,
Bhurisrava and the sage Pareswara, who was associated with the Kuru family, and his wife Satyavati, who had the status of the mother for Dhritarastra and Pandu – all looked after him most affectionately as he was growing up. His brother Pandu did not enjoy any special privileges with respect to him, and Dhritarastra did not suffer discrimination in any form. In Sarala’s narrative of their growing up, it was Dhritarastra who got more attention than Pandu, but there is no pronouncedly sympathetic attitude of the poet towards him on account of his deficiency. The telling is matter-of-fact.

The young Pandu turned out to be a great king. For all his power, popularity and prosperity, he remained a true younger brother to his elder brother. But Dhritarastra was jealous of him; by nature he was jealous: *para sampada dekhi mu na paarai re sanghata* (I can’t see the prosperity of others, my friend), he told his wife Gandhari (*Aaadi Parva* I, 138: 26). He even went to the extent of asking his wife to choose some auspicious day when they both could offer themselves to the Ganga. Gandhari consoled him and told him to give up jealousy which would only earn him a place in hell. Pandu overheard their conversation and readily offered him the throne of Hastinapura, promising the Kuru elders that he would retire to the forest and protect the kingdom on behalf of his brother from there. In this part of the narrative it is not the sentimental and the generous king Pandu, but the unhappy Dhritarastra, who occupies the centre stage. And once Pandu moved to the forest, he is settled in the periphery of the narrative. The poet tells us about the curse on him, his death when it came and a few other things in which he played but a small part. But he does not bring him into the story of Hastinapura in any way.

Dhritarastra wasn’t so blind as to be unable to see that his kingship was viewed as a gratuitous gift from his brother. When his brother died, he was in considerable hurry to crown Duryodhana the king of Hastinapura. He knew that even after Pandu’s death, he would not be regarded as anything other than an interim ruler of the kingdom. He wanted his son to be what he himself so intensely wanted to be, but knew he could never be in real terms. If the kingdom was to be his, then it would be possible only through the crowning of his son as king. But in the beginning he did not place this crude proposal before the Kuru elders in such explicit terms. He sought their advice about who he should anoint king, but all the elders knew what exactly he had in mind. They flatly told him that there was no way his son
Duryodhana could become king; Yudhisthira was the eldest, so the throne must be his. Bhurishrava said it bluntly that Pandu’s kingdom must go to Pandu’s son.

This was when his crudity found its full expression. Dhritarastra quoted scriptures – was there not a precedent for the younger son to become the king, did Dasaratha not give his kingdom to Bharata, and not to his eldest son, Rama, he asked. Vidura did not mince words as he warned him: Dasaratha had indeed done so, but as a consequence, Bharata did not become king, and Dasaratha perished (Aadi Parva I, 491: 138).

Later, after the jatu gruha (lac house) incident, in which the Pandavas and their mother were supposed to have been burnt to death, Dhritarastra again raised the matter of Duryodhana’s kingship. This time there was no opposition from the Kuru elders. Soon Duryodhana became the king. And with that, Dhritarastra, who was hardly in control even when he shared the centre space in the narrative with Sakuni and Duryodhana, moved quietly to the periphery.

Dhritarastra was not a willing party to any of the anti-Pandava initiatives of Duryodhana. If there was one single political agenda that occupied king Duryodhana’s attention once he knew that the Pandavas had not perished in the lac house fire, it was to deny any share of the kingdom to them. However in Sarala’s narrative, this was just one manifestation of the strong sense of revenge and the deep-seated hatred that he had for his cousins. As for Dhritarastra, he would have been most comfortable in a world without the Pandavas, but he would never consent to any scheme to get rid of them.

And no one really cared to seek his opinion on things. For decision-making, Duryodhana did not seek his advice, neither did he seek the advice of the Kuru elders such as Bhishma and Bhurisrava. He worked on the advice of Sakuni, Karna, Kripacharya and Aswasthama. Dhritarastra was not there when his sons tried to disrobe Draupadi. But it was he who freed the Pandavas from Duryodhana’s slavery and returned their kingdom to them at Draupadi’s request. He did it as the head of the family. He of course did not do it out of any sense of fairness and justice or any feeling of remorse for whatever had happened in the Kaurava court leading to the attempt to humiliate Draupadi in that crude manner. He did it out of fear. When Draupadi cast an angry glance at the Kaurava women’s quarters in the palace, a fire ensued,
and came running into the court Duryodhana’s wife, Bhanumati. She fell at Draupadi’s feet and implored her to protect her. And Draupadi looked angrily at Dussasana, who was still tugging at her cloth, and Dussasana collapsed. Karna fainted. Duryodhana fell from the throne unconscious and had to be supported by Bhishma and others. When Sanjaya reported all this to Dhritarastra, he was frightened. He sought Draupadi’s forgiveness and gave back everything Yudhishira had lost in the game of dice.

But he could not do anything to stop the war. After seeking and receiving blessings from Bhishma, Drona, other Kuru elders and Karna in the Kurukshetra battlefield, Yudhishthira went to him, and appealed to him to persuade Duryodhana to call off the war. Dhritarastra did not say a word in reply (Bhishma Parva, 114: 178). He had never supported the war. He had not liked the humiliation of Krishna in the Kaurava court. He did not want Krishna to return empty-handed. However, none of these was inspired by anything profound or generous or unselfish. He was simply, but understandably, afraid of the consequences of the war; after all, it was his children who were going to the pitiless battlefield. He disliked Sakuni intensely. He knew it so very well that he was misguiding his son and pushing him to his destruction.

Why did he not say anything to Yudhishthira? Sarala says nothing explicitly about it, leaving it to his readers to make sense of it in their own ways. Did he keep mum thinking that it was already too late? Or was he aware that it was well beyond him, a retired king, to intervene in such a serious matter of the kingdom as war? All along he had known that he did not matter in Duryodhana’s decision-making process. Or was it because at that moment he was hopeful that his son would win; there was such a mighty army led by the invincible Bhishma to fight for his son. He knew who Krishna really was, but perhaps took comfort from the fact that after all, he had promised his brother Balarama to merely witness the war and not participate in it. Then in his son’s kingship he found a certain psychological legitimization of his own kingship of Hastinapura, as mentioned earlier.

Dhritarastra had no role to play in the war – the blind has no place in a battlefield. But he had to be there in the narrative of the war because the father had to suffer on a day-to-day basis, in fact, a death-to-death basis. As the war progressed, he came to realize that he was losing. Now it was not the possibility of the loss of the kingdom that worried him. It was the loss of the dear ones. The impossible had happened; Bhishma had fallen, grievously
wounded, and was awaiting death, Drona had been decapitated and Bhurishrava had been killed. Then he came to know about the brutal killing of Dussasana and the mutilation of his body. The only death that pleased the grieving father was his brother-in-law Sakuni’s but he died too late. Finally Duryodhana, who had fled from the battlefield under the darkness of the night, gave him the news of the death of the rest of his sons and of the death of his grandson Lakshmana Kumar. He was devastated.

He vented his frustration and sorrow on Duryodhana. He had not liked his unwillingness to deal with the Pandavas fairly. He had never liked his stubbornness and his arrogance. Now the shattered father blamed him squarely for the death of his brothers. He blamed him for trying to save his own life after getting his brothers and relatives killed. He blamed him for not giving their share of the kingdom to the Pandavas, for not paying heed to the wise counsel of Bhishma, Drona, and Vidura and acting instead in accordance with the wishes of Sakuni. He blamed him too for humiliating Krishna, who was Narayana himself, and finally, for not dying in the battlefield, looking at Krishna, which would have given him access to vaikuntha. And he blamed himself for not having listened to the wise Vidura, who had suggested to him to get his eldest son killed in order to save his clan. He reproached Duryodhana for his fear of death and then asked him to go to the sage Durvasa and with his permission, enter the lake vyaasa sarovara, which was the only place where he would be safe. This was the father speaking; he had chided him harshly as never before but at the same time had told him what to do to protect himself.

The death of his sons had devastated him. His thoughts were of them alone. At that painful hour, the impending defeat in the war and the consequent the loss of the kingdom did not seem to matter much to him. That loss of his children was so overwhelming that the other losses appeared insignificant. After the war, when the Pandavas came to pay their respects to him and Gandhari, they didn’t want to see them. They were terribly lonely and wanted to grieve over their loss quietly in private. At that moment of grief they looked upon the Pandavas as the killers of their sons, and as insensitive victors, who had come, not to meet them, but to hurt and humiliate them by their presence. With some unpleasant truth about their irresponsible parenting – the kind of truth that would ordinarily hurt and annoy, but in a terribly painful moment would calm or rather numb, Vidura persuaded them to meet the Pandavas, who, he counseled them, were also his sons.
For a while the narrative was constrained to bring Dhritarastra from the periphery to the centre because it was necessary to show how the winners and the losers of the same family responded to each other when they met for the first time after the war. Yudhisthira had come, not merely to receive their blessings, but also to make an effort to heal their wounds. But at that moment, it was revenge that was in the mind of the grief-stricken elders. Perhaps for the first time in their life they used cunning to harm the Pandavas, which is unsurprising because cunning is the first and the last weapon of the weak. Gandhari tried to kill Yudhisthira with the all-consuming supernatural energy of her gaze, and when she failed, her husband tried to destroy Bhima with his murderous embrace. Krishna’s cunning more than cancelled out theirs. They were thoroughly exposed, and crushed: Gandhari reduced her only surviving son, Durdasa, to ashes (an episode that Sarala created), and Dhritarastra broke up only an artifact, a Bhima-like iron structure, thinking that he had killed Bhima. Before she faded into the background Gandhari cursed Krishna. Quite appropriately since cursing God is indeed the only way the utterly miserable can come to terms with oneself, no matter how responsible one might have been for that state of affairs. It was this curse that directed the course of a part of the Mahabharata story: the destruction of the Yadus, Krishna’s clan, and with their passing away, the end of the avataras of Krishna and Balarama.

Dhritarashtra and Gandhari continued to live in the palace, despite sage Vyasa’s advice. It was not right to live with one’s enemies, he more warned than told them and advised them to retire to the forest - unlike Vidura, the great sage never counseled the two branches of the Kuru family not to treat each other as enemies. Now it was not because he was an insensitive and a comfort-loving person, one completely without a sense of self-respect that Dhritarashtra continued to live in the palace; it was because of Yudhisthira’s reverential insistence. His love had restrained his steps towards the forest. Bhima, however, often went out of his way to humiliate him and make him feel that he was totally unwelcome to live in the palace, and Yudhisthira was unable to restrain his brother. Unable to cope with Bhima’s insults, Dharitrastra decided to leave for the forest with wife Gandhari. Here the poet folds up his story. His death (along with his wife’s and Kunti’s) in a forest fire was no more than a mere appendix of the narrative.
Dussasana has an emphatic presence in the story; after all, to an extent, he was to his elder brother Duryodhana what Bhima was to his elder brother Yudhisthira. “To an extent”, because, to give just one reason, Bhima often thought quite differently from his brother and would even openly disagree with him. Bhima could go to the extent of disobeying him. When the old Dhritarastra, then dependent on the Pandavas, wanted some money to perform some ritual, the king Yudhisthira readily agreed, but Bhima flatly told him that he would never let this happen. Earlier once he had refused to meet his brothers including Yudhisthira. After they escaped from the burning palace of wax, the Pandavas and their mother Kunti moved from place to place living on what they got from begging. On an auspicious occasion, Yudhisthira and his three brothers went on a pilgrimage to Goutama tirtha (place of pilgrimage). Bhima did not join them on Kunti’s advice. Now things took such a turn that Bhima became the king of Shiva paura. He went to live in the palace but his mother continued to live in the hut, waiting for her sons to return from their pilgrimage. When Yudhisthira and his brothers went to meet Bhima, he would not meet them, apprehending that he would have to join them and return to the hard life he had left behind after becoming king. Details of how the sage Sumantaka persuaded him to join his brothers need not detain us (Aadi Parva II, 693-713).

Dussasana was not like that. He did not think differently from his brother at all and did not disobey him. He did not do anything on his own. Bringing Draupadi to the Kaurava court was not his decision. It was Duryodhana’s. Dussasana was ever willing to do whatever Duryodhana wanted to be done. Although Duryodhana did not ask him specifically to bring Draupadi to the court, he rushed to do so. And the enthusiasm that he demonstrated in the process was of course something for which Duryodhana could not be held responsible. Now it was not his decision again to disrobe Draupadi in public; such a thing never even crossed his mind. The decision was his brother’s. He was asked to carry out the order, and he readily set himself to it.

He was not one of his brother’s key advisers when it came to decision-making; Duryodhana never sought his opinion on any matter. But he did not seem to mind; mechanically, in fact
almost instinctively, he did what his brother asked him to do. It was not his idea to attack Krishna in the Kaurava court where he had gone as the emissary of the Pandavas; he did so, again with energy and passion, only when Duryodhana asked him specifically to do it. His enthusiasm could be due to his commitment to his brother; it could also be due to his desire to impress him. It might, in part, be due to some sickness in his nature – he enjoyed humiliating a victim and watching him or her suffer. This is most evident in the episode about the disrobing of Draupadi.

He was a great warrior, and fought heroically in the Kurukshetra war till his death. But his achievements were never projected in the narrative because only the greatest of the great warriors in the Kaurava army were in the limelight. Almost all of them were archers - an engagement with arrows, both ordinary and divine, had the potentiality of providing far more spectacular and absorbing war narratives than any other weapon. Fighting with mace stole the show only when the best of the mace fighters fought with the best. Unjustly cursed by sage Durvasa, when he was an infant, to suffer dismemberment in war, he was a loser throughout. In Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata he is arguably the second most hated character (the most hated being Sakuni) for almost that single outrageous act against Draupadi, although he was only carrying out his brother’s order. He received not even one kind word from his brother during his lifetime for his unfailing loyalty to him; he was almost taken for granted. The poet compensates him for this lack in the episode on Duryodhana’s crossing of the river of blood. As he saw his dead body floating towards him in that terrible river of blood, Duryodhana showered praise on his younger brother for his bravery and prowess as a warrior.

In the story Dussasana appeared in the centre stage only twice: first, when attempt was made to humiliate Draupadi, and then when he fought Bhima in the final battle of his life. But he did not dominate it. Once Draupadi was in the Kaurava court, it was she who dominated that space, except when Krishna appeared in the story – when Krishna was around Sarala gave no space to anyone else. Soon Dussasana became only the passive agent, a ridiculous figure, who was mindlessly pulling Draupadi’s sari – the single piece with which she had covered herself as was the norm for a woman during her periods. Then in the battlefield once Bhima regained his consciousness and the fight entered the second and the conclusive phase, it was he who dominated all of the space. Once he felled Dussasana on the ground and rained blows on him, the helpless Kaurava did not even try to resist, as though he had seen death. He
was reduced to a passive victim. As he was being so savagely dismembered, limb by limb, it was not so much he, as the sheer horror of the act that must have been in the mind of the onlookers who were watching the single combat.

In telling Sarala’s story of Dussasana, we have set aside the *alaukika* dimension of his life and death. Just one brief observation in passing though: from that perspective, Dussasana lived in order to be killed the way he was. If he had the knowledge of his past existences, he would have known it all and suffered every moment of his life in terrible misery. Or would the condemned man have tried to live a virtuous life, readying himself to meet his fate? Such an alternative story was not very likely since it would have created complications for the storyteller to lead him to that horrible death in a credible manner. How would an audience ever accept such a brutal and disgraceful killing of a pious man whatever might have been his past? In any case, Sarala denies him that knowledge and makes him an ordinary human, who is untroubled by the past that lies a death behind the life that he is living.

One has the feeling that he has not been adequately individualized in the narrative; he gives the impression of being more of a shadow of Duryodhana; in fact, hardly anything more than a manifestation of the active aspect of his brother’s wickedness. Unrelated to Duryodhana he has no existence in the story.

But this shadowy figure pervades the story as only a very few do in it; he is psychologically there when he is physically not there. He was seen as the prime agent of Draupadi’s humiliation by at least the Pandavas and their wife Draupadi. Therefore he never really completely disappeared from their talk. There are of course only very few references to him after Bhima poured his blood on Draupadi’s hair, one particularly poignant one being Gandhari’s asking Bhima how he could bring himself to drink his blood. In any case, even when he ceased to exist in the narrative itself, he does not disappear from the readers’ mind, as he certainly would not have, five centuries ago, from the minds of Sarala’s audience. Evil doers, real or perceived, live a long life.

What is the point of creating this character which is so derivative and is nothing more than a mere extension of Duryodhana, one might ask. From the *alaukika* perspective, there may be a persuasive explanation, but here we have decided to set that Sudraka Brahma and his
destiny aside. From the point of view of the narrative the following could be said. The king needs someone to execute his command; the story of a king is hardly interesting if the king has to do the dirty things himself - the spectacle of the mighty king of Hastinapura dragging a wailing Draupadi by her hair himself to his court and trying to disrobe her in the presence of his courtiers is fit for a farce. Now an ordinary soldier could not have dragged Draupadi to the court. Someone special was needed. Duryodhana needed a Dussasana; the narrative needed Dussasana for yet another reason: the Sudraka Brahma story was to be brought to an end. Apart from this, Dussasana was a central figure in two events - Draupadi’s humiliation and his own dismemberment – which all tellers of the Mahabharata story through centuries have recreated into memorable episodes. In the hands of Sarala these became remarkably spectacular episodes of the grand narrative.

Except for a short while Shantanu remained on the periphery of the story. His married life with Ganga constituted that period. But even here, for the most part, he remained somewhat in the shadow. It was Ganga who controlled their married life, and she was the one who received prominence in that sad episode. There was just one occasion when the subdued husband asserted himself, and with that came the end of their married life. From here began the turbulent narrative of the Kurus.

Shantanu was a great king, and at the same time a great devotee of Shiva. He lived in the nether world, devoutly worshipping Shiva, who had made it his abode during his penance following his killing of a cow. Ganga, who had chosen him as her consort, got separated from him when he retired to the nether world. She did not even know where he had gone. No wonder, surely, since it is always his devotee to whom Bhagawan is a great deal more accessible than to his divine consorts and gods and other celestials. Thus what his divine consort did not know, his dear devotee did.

The sage-like king Shantanu – he was generally spoken of as a yogi; in fact, Ganga once called him a mahaa yogi (great sage) - ruled his kingdom from the nether world. He had a
special power of vision; thus he could see from there how things were in his kingdom. When some demon attacked it, he killed him with an arrow from there itself. If it was afflicted by some other disorder, he could set things right without having to come to his kingdom. The kingdom prospered, and the king lived a blissful life, worshipping Shiva.

Bhagawan Shiva was pleased with him and gave him the title *duti iswara* (second Shiva). He asked him to visit the heavens and the mortal world; so he left the nether world. He had dressed himself like Shiva – it is not clear why he did so: was it because he was full of Shiva consciousness or was it because he wanted the worlds to know that he was the *duti iswara*? Whatever the reason, it eventually brought him trouble. His resemblance with Shiva was so great that even gods could not distinguish between the two and would offer him worship. One might condone it in his case; he was not the one to get corrupted by illusion about himself after receiving the title *duti iswara*. In all probability he accepted worship, knowing that it was intended for his lord. It is socially acceptable even today, in the villages at least, to offer worship to an actor who plays the role of Shiva (or any god) in a performance or to one who is dressed like Shiva on some religious occasion. It is not unreasonable at all to assume that the same must have been the case in Sarala’s time as well.

Once in the mortal world, his problems started. Like the gods and other celestials in *swarga loka*, Ganga and her father too mistook him for Shiva, and she readily agreed when her father asked her to marry him. She had been waiting for this for what for her was an unending stretch of time. But it did not take her long to realize her mistake. When on being asked by the priest during the wedding ritual, Shantanu named his *gotra* and declared his lineage, she realized the terrible mistake she had made. Shiva had no *gotra* and no lineage, she told her father; so the bridegroom could just not be Shiva. She got off her father’s lap, the customary seat of the bride during the ceremony and interrupted the ritual. But her father persuaded her to honour his sacred oath to Shantanu that he would give his daughter in marriage to him. He reminded her that this had her consent too. In consideration of her father’s situation, she relented and agreed to marry the unreal Shiva. But she told him that she was turbulent and impetuous, and even Brahma and Narayana had found her difficult to manage, and she extracted a promise from Shantanu that he would not misbehave with him whatever were the provocations from her. If he called her *gaangi* disrespectfully instead of *gangaa*, she would leave him at once.
In that event of momentous significance, Shantanu was the passive character. Every significant initiative in their relationship was taken by Ganga. She dominated the narrative and Shantanu was in her shadow. Things remained the same during their marriage, and when it broke. When she was on the verge of killing their seventh son, Shantanu stopped her, reprimanded her severely and used the forbidden word. She said that she was working for the dissolution of their marriage and was eagerly waiting for that day. As she was leaving him, he tried to stop her for the newborn baby. He implored her not to leave the infant; how would he live without the mother, he asked her. She said she did not care whether he lived or died: \textit{jiile jiun male maru} (if (he wished) to live, may he live, if (he wishes) to die, may he die), were her exact words (\textit{Aadi Parva} I, 40: 256). Whatever she meant by these words (which would normally be interpreted as something like, I don’t care whether he lives or dies), these became the blessing of \textit{ichhaa mrutyu} (dying according to one’s wish) for the infant. His father, not the gods, named the newborn Bhishma.

Before she left him, Ganga cursed Shantanu. She was no more his wife, she told him, and in her new relationship, he, who was Shiva’s devotee, was like her disciple and he had committed a terrible sacrilege by touching her: \textit{ebe mun tohara guru tu mohara shishi} (Now I am your preceptor, you are my disciple) (\textit{Aadi Parva} I, 40: 261). The newborn’s child would kill him, she said, and left.

She had earlier cursed his sons, Chitravirya and Bichitravirya, who were born out of the natural system - not from any mortal woman’s womb. We set aside the facts of their birth. Afraid that Ganga might kill them, their father had left them in the care of Satyavati, sage Parashara’s wife. Ganga was infuriated when she discovered this by accident. She cursed that those sons of his would die issueless. In a way, it is from the curses of Ganga that the story of \textit{Mahabharata} started.

Their was a strange marriage, with the wife seeking a way of ending it as soon as possible. As a result, Shantanu lived a life of absolute misery. In order to honour his word to her at the time of their marriage that he would do nothing to displease her in the least, he underwent sheer torture. It was not because of his infatuation with her that he made that promise to her; he did it because he was a decent, simple and saintly person. He had no idea then that he
would be the one to try to save the marriage when his wife would be the one to try to wreck it with such desperation. In Sarala’s narrative the blameless Shantanu epitomizes the persecuted husband; he also remains a powerful symbol of the limits of reconciliation and reasonableness in a relationship which one tries to protect and the other tries to destroy.

Chitravirya and Bichitravirya died issueless, so their wives were forced to resort to *niyoga*, but the women suffered a strong sense of guilt. One of them died during childbirth and the other drowned herself as an act of ritual sacrifice, unable to bear the burden of guilt. Their children, Dhritarastra and Pandu, were left orphans. Bhishma vowed not to marry in order to save his father. He refused kingship because he considered it totally unacceptable that one like him, who would never have a child, was worthy of the throne. Anyone even minimally acquainted with the story of Mahabharata knows the serious complications these decisions gave rise to in due course (*Aadi Parva I*, 132: 22).

After Ganga left Shantanu, there is little that we hear of him. Sarala surely thought that Shantanu had already made his contribution to the development of the story and dispatched him to the periphery from where he never returned to the centre. There was no woman in his life before Ganga and there was none after Ganga. She had brought confusion, conflict, dilemma and challenge to his serene life. She had completely engaged him when she lived with him, and when she left, she denied him even memories of their time together. She had made him conscious of their new relationship as guru and shishya, which would not allow him to recollect their days as man and wife. He continued to be the king, and there was nothing unusual in his kingdom during this period of his rule. Besides by now there were others to assist him. His sons had grown up. Bhishma had already come to be known as the warrior who had absolutely no equal. He had matured too and become wise. He lived a virtuous life. Then there was the wise Bhurishrava to advise him on matters of state, and there was also the sage Pareswara to turn to for advice. Pareswara’s wife, Satyavati, was looking after the household. Shantanu lived the life of a recluse, waiting for a successor. When his sons Chitravirya and Bichitravirya did not have any child, Shantanu knew why. Despite Ganga’s curse, he asked his youngest son Bhishma to marry and continue the lineage. But he could not conceal his anxiety from his son when the time came for the bridegroom’s party to start the journey to the bride’s place. When the surprised and the worried son asked him the
reason, he could not withhold the truth from him. He told his son about Ganga’s curse, and Bhishma discarded the bridegroom’s dress at once.

Shantanu stopped the fight between Parasurama and Bhishma, when it was threatening to be disastrous for the former. He was there when Pandu married Kunti, but he had no role in it. It was Bhishma who had negotiated the marriage. Soon at Bhishma’s suggestion, which had Bhurishrava’s support, he crowned Pandu king, but not before making sure that his son’s suggestion was not insincere – that his son really did not want to become king. He was there too when Pandu abdicated in favour of Dhritarastra, although he neither expressed his opinion on Pandu’s decision, nor was asked by anyone to do so. Like Bhurishrava and Bhishma, he was only informed about this decision of Pandu.

After this, Shantanu literally disappears from the story. There is no mention even of when and how he died. But did he die at all? Did Bhishma’s refusal to marry give him eternal life? If it was so, then what happened to him? Where was he? He was surely not in the palace in the stormy times that followed the birth of the children of Gandhari, Kunti and Madri. Did he go on pilgrimage? Did he spend his endless years in the ashram of some rishi? Or did he go to wherever Shiva was: the nether world or the hills of Kapilasha, never to be separated from his ewart, his lord? No one ever mentioned him. There was nothing that kept his memory alive. His celebrated son, Bhishma, was generally known as Ganga’s son, hardly ever his. He seems to have disappeared from the mortal world even more quietly than he had entered it from the nether world, dressed like Shiva. This ending of his story may not, however, be inappropriate; when it comes to a sage, a quiet ending is the best.

We must now turn to Bhishma. He has such a dominant presence in the narrative that it would appear rather strange that we treat him here as a character-on-the periphery. More often than not, when he appears in an episode, he invites attention to himself. The greatest warrior when he was young and one of the greatest warriors even in his old age, he was also one of the wisest men of his time, who understood dharma and lived in accordance with it.
Naturally such a person could just not remain without attention. However, even when he was in the centre stage, he was not in it from a point of view.

He was like his father in many ways. He was a great devotee of Narayana and did not fail to recognize Narayana in Krishna. Although this wise man participated in the affairs of life, he did not do so out of self-interest or for personal glory. He did things with a sense of duty, without attachment. He was uninvolved, but not insincere. He had a difficult life because circumstances forced him to do things he did not like, but he had to do those very things since in his judgement, doing so constituted acts of dharma for him.

Being for the most part in Sarala’s *Mahaabhaarata* a passive participant in the crucial events, he does not contribute much to the development of the story. His main contribution in this regard is in the beginning, when he played an active role in the affairs of the Kuru family. It was he who decided against marriage, and it was he who decided against accepting the kingship. The entire complications of the inheritance issue had their origins here. Believing that the Pandavas had been burnt to death in the wax palace, he, when asked for advice, had supported Dhritarastra’s proposal to crown Duryodhana king.

There was one blemish in his otherwise clean life. He committed – arguably - one act of injustice and cruelty, for which he received a curse. It was with respect to Amba. He drove the innocent woman to suicide.

Amba’s two elder sisters had married his brothers Chitravirya and Bichitravirya. So when Shantanu asked Bhishma to marry, he sent word to her father, king Padmanabha, saying that he should give his youngest daughter to him in marriage. It is unclear why Bhishma chose her - whether he had developed a distinct fondness for her or whether he simply wanted to marry into the same family into which his brothers had, which is more likely. In any case, his messengers found that the king had already arranged a *swayambara* for the princess. Now when the princes and kings who had assembled there heard of Bhishma’s proposal, they left the *swayambara* at once in fear of Bhishma. Then when the news of his promise to remain unmarried reached the king, he tried to give his daughter in marriage to king Salwa. He had earlier expressed his desire to marry her, but her father had not accepted his proposal, and had arranged a *swayambara* for her instead. Now Salwa was happy to receive Padmanabha’s
invitation, and the bridegroom was on his way to his palace with the customary procession when on the way he heard about all that had happened. Dead scared of Bhishma he returned to his kingdom. After this Padmanabha invited king Birabahu but he too refused his invitation for the same reason. He did not stop with Birabahu, but no king or prince would agree - for fear of Bhishma. For them it did not matter that Bhishma could not marry Amba, what did was that he had wanted to marry her. In the story she remained Bhishma’s bride till her death or even beyond her death, depending on one’s perspective. Now which king or prince would have dared marry her? However Bhishma had not given anyone a reason to think that he would invite his ire if he married the girl he had once wanted to marry.

One day the father arrived at Bhishma’s place with his daughter. He told him how no king or prince was willing to marry his daughter and blamed him for having caused such misery and humiliation to her. Bhishma would not agree. He told him that he had not rejected his daughter to marry someone else. He told him about his helplessness about the matter; he told him he had done only what a son would for his father. The Kuru elders tried to persuade him again to marry Amba, but he would not agree. Then Amba’s father simply left her there, asking her to work in Bhishma’s palace and undergo whatever destiny had in store for her. He probably had some very faint hope that if she served him sincerely, some day his heart might melt and he would then accept her as his wife.

The young and beautiful princess worked in his household literally day and night, and there is no evidence in the narrative to suggest that she ever tried to tempt Bhishma. One day Bhishma in anger ordered his attendants to drag her by her hair and throw her out of his palace. He did not want to see her, not just in his house, in the kingdom as well. His words were cruel and his demeanour disgusting. Amba asked him what dharma driving her out would bring him: mote naasa kale kisa dharma ta hoiba (if you destroy me what dharma would result) (Aadi Parva I, 62: 54). Bhishma said that he was terribly afraid of her: tote dekhile muhin manare bada traasi (When I see you, I am greatly scared) (Aadi Parva I, 62: 55). Humiliated, wounded and utterly helpless, the innocent princess said she would sacrifice herself at the holy Prayag with the wish to kill him. Parasurama intervened in favour of her thinking that her self-sacrifice would bring disrepute to the Kuru family, and he went to the extent of fighting Bhishma, but he lost. After this, Amba ended her life. As for Bhishma, he
never considered himself responsible for Amba’s suffering, and if he ever had a feeling of guilt on her account, he never expressed it.

But Bhishma had lost. He, who everyone was afraid of, was afraid, not really of Amba, as he confessed to her, but of himself, which he did not tell her. The beautiful and noble woman, who was undergoing totally undeserved suffering in silence, had entered his heart. He was afraid that he would not perhaps be able to control himself if he lived close to her. In order to protect himself, he meted out the most unjust treatment to her. This was an act of utter selfishness. In order to live according to dharma, he committed the most adharmik act.

We might linger on the theme of Amba for a while. The wise man that he was, Bhishma must have known that he had lost. When Shikhandi was born, he knew that it was Amba who was reborn as Shikhandi. Shikhandi was not born a male and later underwent sex change and became a male, the details of which are unnecessary here. Prince Shikhandi was a fairly accomplished warrior. But for Bhishma he was Amba. He avoided her. He was there for the archery test at Draupadi’s swayambhara and had actually lifted the bow. As he was announcing that in case he was successful, Draupadi should be married to Duryodhana, he heard Shikhandi’s voice. When he saw him, he quietly returned to his seat. When asked why he withdrew from the test, he mumbled a vague answer. When Yudhisthira sought his blessings for victory in the war, he told him that on the tenth day he should arrange for Shikhandi to face him in the battlefield, seeing whom he would give up arms. On the tenth day it was Amba who he saw when Shikhandi confronted him, and he felt an uncontrollable urge for her. The suppressed desire for her that spanned two existences of her suddenly burst into a turbulent expression. In that state he fell to her arrows.

Bhishma’s marginalization started with Duryodhana’s becoming king. He was almost never consulted on matters of state by the new king, and when he gave his advice or views on something, it was ignored. He realized that he simply did not fit in the new order and seemed resigned to his degraded status. With Drona alone the lonely man would share his unhappiness when he found that something wrong was going on. He was disinclined to take any initiative on anything. On the whole, he had a weak presence in the narrative until the Kuruksheta war took place.
As already said, nothing that he said or did contributed to any significant development of the story, except in its early part. It was on Drona’s, not his, advice that Krishna was given the honour of first worship in Yudhisthira’s raajasuya yajna. In fact, no one had even sought his advice on this matter. The assembly of kings had sought Drona’s. During the game of dice, when Yudhisthira lost his wealth, he asked him not to play any more. Luck was not with him that day, he told him. It was unasked for advice, and Yudhisthira did not even respond to him, leave alone follow his advice. He was there when Draupadi was brought to the Kaurava court. When Dussasana tried to disrobe her, she did not ask him to intervene, neither did she Drona or anyone else. She sought protection only from her husbands. When Bhishma saw the miracle that was happening, he sarcastically asked Duryodhana whether he had become blind like his father and why he was unwilling to read the meaning of what was happening. How many pieces of clothes his wife wore, he rebuked him. But no one paid heed to him. He wanted Duryodhana to give two villages to the Pandavas and not let Krishna return empty handed from the Kaurava court. Sakuni disagreed and argued with him in the court, and eventually Duryodhana decided against the Kuru elder’s advice.

During this phase, the one or two occasions in which Bhishma showed some enthusiasm were associated with Krishna. When Sishupala insulted Krishna, he sharply rebuked him. When he heard that Krishna was coming to the Kaurava court as Yudhisthira’s emissary, he was very happy that he was going to see Narayana. On both occasions in the most devout tone he recounted the various doings of (Krishna-) Narayana as he argued with Krishna’s detractors.

He was not a party to Duryodhana’s decision to fight a conclusive war against the Pandavas. Neither did he show any keenness to play a dominant role in it, such as, say, leading the army. He had no enemies to motivate him to fight, and he had no desire to use the war as a demonstration of his greatness as a warrior. But once the decision that he would lead the army was taken, he was no more an unenthusiastic warrior who considered himself doomed to fight that war. The narrator had to bring him to the very centre of the narrative because with Bhishma fighting, the narrative of the war would be unconvincing without Ganga’s son occupying that space.
Till he fell on the tenth day, Bhishma dominated the story. On the battlefield he forced the Witness to act. There Bhishma would often set the ball rolling, and then others played. Whatever significant happened, happened in relation to him – he was excluded from nothing. During the time he was fighting, heroic performance in the war was defined with reference to him, as were questions of ethics in fighting. But again in the development of the story, he hardly played a role. The story did not move forward when the war started. It lingered on in the battlefield. By the time the episode of war was over, on his bed of arrows, Bhishma was waiting for the closure of his own story.

When he fell on the tenth day to a complex of things of which Arjuna’s arrows constituted only one, he moved to the periphery. His story as a character of Mahabharata in Sarala’s version effectively ended. But it would be unconvincing for any Mahabharata narrative if it dropped Bhishma unceremoniously with the incidents on that tenth day. He was too heroic, too accomplished a warrior, too wise and too virtuous for that. Sarala knew it. In a short Shaanti Parva, his Bhishma instructed Yudhisthira on various things, mostly of a practical nature, and then prayed for and received Krishna’s blessings, as this extraordinary man who would die only when he wished to, invited his death.
Sarala never said he was retelling someone else’s story. Only his critics say that he did so, and we do not disagree. What he said was that he was Vyasa in an earlier birth. We have nothing to say about that. But we wonder whether he meant what he said in so many words. Did he suggest that all poets who composed Mahabharata were Vyasa? From this point of view, no narrator narrated anyone else’s story; each told his own story of the Kurus. The stories are similar; after all, the subject of the stories is the same. They are differences because each poet made sense of what all had happened to the Kurus in his own way. We might note how Sarala saw some of the Kaurava women in his mind’s eye.

The marriage was over, gifts had been given to the sons-in-law, commensurate with their status, and it was time for Draupadi to leave her parents’ place. Her parents were on tears. Her father, Drupada, fell at Yudhisthira’s feet and in all humility begged him to forgive ten faults of his daughter, in accordance with the tradition. But the king Drupada was feeling miserable at the father Drupada’s self-degrading act. Unable to control himself, he burst out saying what a misfortune it was to be the father of a girl. No matter how great and powerful one might be, one simply turned into the most helpless of servants – *bhrutyara bhrutya* (servant’s servant), as he put it - to the family to which one gave one’s daughter in marriage. In that miserable mood he said that it would be better for one to abandon one’s wife if she gave birth to a girl than go through such humiliation. He said even more than this: one should abandon that girl child as well.

Vyasa interrupted him. Such thoughts tended to come to one’s mind at the time of one’s daughter’s wedding, he told him by way of comforting him. Then he recounted the story of creation and the role the female being played in it – all were born from her: gods, demons, humans, animals and others. She was also the cause of bliss. Now it was Drupada’s turn to interrupt the sage. Very cautious about his words so that the venerable sage would not feel
offended even in the least, he asked him whether it was not the case that because of Uma, her father perished. The sage Markandeya intervened and put an end to their exchange. He told Drupada that such questions would lead to further questions, and there was no point in indulging in arguments and counterarguments on the subject. He should attend instead to the matter of his daughter’s departure.

In any case, those words of Vyasa constitute perhaps the only assertion in support of the woman in Sarala’s magnum opus. No one said anything even close to the same. One of the boons his devotee, Vidura, asked of Krishna was that he must never be reborn as a woman: \textit{stiri kule janma mote nakara jagunaahaa} (O Lord of the Universe, do not give me birth – i.e., let me be reborn - as woman) \textit{(Udyoga Parva, 100: 50)}. Advising Yudhishthira on the duties and the responsibilities of a king from his bed of arrows as he was waiting for the auspicious time to die, the wise Bhishma said that he should never trust women: \textit{stiri linge biswaasa na jibu sarbathaa} (“You must never trust women.”) \textit{(Shaanti Parva, 6: 64)}.

Yudhishthira was “afraid” of Draupadi, which may not be surprising - he was as peaceable and mild mannered as she was aggressive and vindictive. For fear of her he once paid his respects to her brother Dhristadyumna in public. The Odia saying \textit{bhaarijaa darare salaaku namaskaara} (Paying respects to the brother-in-law out of fear for the wife) that has its origins in \textit{Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata} has immortalized this event. However, in his view of things wife never had primacy over brothers. After Arjuna won the archery test, the Kaurava princes attacked him, and Bhima, wild in anger, came to his brother’s rescue. At that time Yudhisthira was worried for the safety of the Kauravas. He asked Sahadeva to dissuade Bhima from fighting them. It would be wrong to kill one’s brothers for a mere wife, he told him: \textit{chhaara stiri paain kimpaa maaribaa sodaranku} (For a mere / worthless woman why shall we kill our brothers) \textit{(Aadi Parva II, 863: 706)}. Later he said the same thing during Draupadi’s humiliation in the Kaurava court. Dussasana had dragged her by her hair to the court and was going to disrobe him. As Draupadi pleaded with him for protection, Bhima expressed his helplessness but at the same time thundered at Dussasana that he would crush his head when the war broke out. Yudhisthira rebuked him sharply there and then; one would get a hundred wives like Draupadi if one had brothers, he told him, but one would not get brothers if one killed them: \textit{draupadi paraa bhaarjyaa sate milibe thile bhaai / nija bhaai}
One would get a hundred wives like Draupadi if the brothers are there / How would we get our brothers if we kill them (Sabhaa Parva II, 496: 140).

Women too had a low view of themselves. As Ambakila consigned herself to the waters of three rivers at the sacred Prayag, she prayed to Bhagawan Madhava (i.e., Narayana) to save her from the dosa (spiritual flaw) of being born as woman (Aadi Parva I, 98: 13). Unable to sleep on a bed of ashes where her husbands slept, a bitterly disappointed Draupadi bemoaned her fate; why He created women at all, she complained to the Creator (Aadi Parva II, 896: 286). Ambika condemned her birth as a woman; women were always impure, she told Satyavati; they would forever crave for handsome men. Draupadi went one step ahead. The handsome and well dressed man could be just anyone, she told Krishna in a certain context – he may be a brother or even a son! : jadyapi abaa bhraatha putrahi n jebe heu / subesha purusa dekhile citta nei thou (He may be a brother or even a son / When a man is well-dressed and handsome, (we) place him in our heart”) (Bana Parva I, 579: 148). Kunti felt humiliated and even sinful about the fact that she enjoyed sex. She believed that it was because of her being a woman – women are like that: stiri janankara swabhaaba se gaadha srungaarena trupati (It is women’s nature to feel contented with intense sexual union) (Aadi Parva I, 228: 59). Incidentally, Arjuna’s wife Subhadra too was a very sensuous woman, but she did not seem to have any sense of embarrassment about it. Sarala does not tell us anything that could explain this difference in attitude between the two women. But if we hazard a guess, the following account should be as good as any other: after all, she was Krishna’s and Balarama’s sister - self-confident, not unduly worried about what others would think about her and somewhat unconcerned, like Balarama, about people and things if they did not concern her directly. Amba had a low opinion of women for a very personal reason: they could not be equal to men in the battlefield because of which they were unable to avenge their hurt and humiliation. She wanted to fight Bhishma but was aware that she was a mere woman, stiri maatara, helpless and incapable of fighting. So she would use her feminine charms against him to subdue him on the battlefield. This was the thought, and this was the wish, with which she put an end to herself, and in those moments before her death, this thought might have given her some comfort.

One might think that this derogatory view of women stemmed primarily from the fact that they were completely excluded from decision-making, including, and most importantly, those
that directly concerned them. Consider their marriage. In short, under ordinary circumstances a girl would marry the person chosen by her parents and family elders. There was of course the system of *swayambara*, which permitted a princess to choose her husband from an assembly of kings and princes. But the freedom the princess enjoyed here was actually quite limited. For example, who would be invited to the *swayambara* was not her choice but her father’s or her brother’s. And one could not just invite oneself to a *swayambara*. Sometimes there was a test for the aspirant for the hand of the princess, but in the making of it the princess, however accomplished, had no say, as in Draupadi’s case. And the princess was obliged to marry the one who was successful, as Draupadi was; she had no choice. In *Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata* the princess could not intervene in the proceedings and stop an aspirant from taking the test if she did not want to marry him. Draupadi did not. In her case, as things turned out, the question of her husband was not decided even in the *swayambara*. The five Pandavas who she married had not won the archery test; only one of them had. Now marriage did not always protect the woman from pressure to have sex outside marriage; Ambika and Ambalika had union, under pressure, with sage Vyasa, their elder brother-in-law. Opting or not opting for niyoga was not an option for them; the decision in this regard was thrust on them.

Apart from being excluded from decision-making, they had hardly any options available to them on matters of significance. In fact the only option they had was to kill themselves. Ambalika exercised that choice. She was oppressed by a strong sense of sin on account of her union with her elder brother-in-law, notwithstanding the fact that she had consented to it, although unwillingly and under moral pressure from Satyavati. She knew why her mother-in-law had pressured her into it; she knew that she had the interest of the clan and of the kingdom in mind. But none of these could calm her, and she decided to end her life. Her sister, Amba, too exercised the same option later, insulted and humiliated by Bhishma. But then the availability of such a choice can hardly be comforting; a choice is hardly a choice when it is between an utterly miserable and degrading life on the one hand and committing suicide on the other. Besides, what choice is that that permanently closes up all possibilities of choice?
Although women in the world of *Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata* were excluded from meaningful decision-making, had no real choice on matters of significance and were not in positions of authority, many Kaurava women were not really all that powerless. It was just that they did not exercise power directly. They derived their authority and power from the powerful men they were associated with, and they exercised power through them. Kunti and Draupadi are glaring examples. Their power derived from the Pandavas, and even more, from Krishna, and it is through them that they tried to achieve whatever they wanted.

Did they not find that predicament rather demeaning, one might ask. They probably had no reason to in that particular social context. Relationships within the family legitimized certain expectations from the members. Those who were dependent on others in the family, like women on their men, were entitled to protection and overall support from those they depended on. But then, were they not anxious and troubled that despite this “right” that they enjoyed, those they depended upon might disappoint them because sometimes the they might consider the expectations unreasonable? At least Kunti and Draupadi were under the impression that they would not. As far as the Pandavas were concerned, they both naturally considered it their right to ask them to carry out their wishes, and they were sanguine that they would do so. As for Krishna, Kunti knew that her sons enjoyed his protection and also that he respected her. And Draupadi depended on him believing that the one who protected the Pandavas would protect their wife too. The Pandavas and Krishna had never made them feel let down – until the time when the question of whether to go for war or not had to be settled once for all, and it was then that the elder Pandavas disappointed them so completely and so unexpectedly.

After Yudhishthira made him his emissary to Duryodhana’s court, Krishna went to each of his four brothers and Draupadi separately to find out, as he put it (it is a different matter that on the question of war, what he wanted and what he told them at that point of time were not the same), whether they had the same view as Yudhishthira’s on the question of peace between the Kauravas and the Pandavas and the connected one of the minimum demand from Duryodhana. He told Draupadi that Yudhishthira, Bhima and Arjuna favoured peace if the minimum demand, namely, one village for each of them, was met. This was unbearable for
her and she fainted. Regaining consciousness she recounted every detail of her humiliation in the hands of the Kauravas, which like a deep, festering wound, had pained her all those years. She sought revenge. And now she found her husbands uncooperative. Bhima seemed to have forgotten the oaths that he had roared in the Kaurava court – oaths that had given her hope for thirteen long years of suffering and humiliation. She turned to Krishna, as she had done earlier when her husbands had refused to protect her in the Kaurava court. She prayed to him to make sure that the war took place. But Krishna did not belong to her family; he was a proper outsider and was not obliged to fulfill her expectations. It is another matter that he did!

At that time Kunti was in Hastinapura, staying in Vidura’s house. Krishna went to meet her too. She was disgusted with Yudhisthira, Bhima and Arjuna when she learnt that they were not keen on war. She said that condoning all that the Kauravas had done them was completely unworthy of the kshatriyas, that her sons were more like jackals than kshatriyas, and that she was ashamed of them: ...putre mora srikaale janma honti / dhikati houkinaa taahaankara jibati (roughly, “…my sons are born jackals / shame on them”) (Udyoga Parva, 109: 98). She implored Krishna to make sure that the war took place. Then she said something to him - an outsider - which one would say to only a very close kin on whom one has not only great trust, but also great claim, based on one’s faith that he would completely honour those feelings and attitudes. She told him that if he did not ensure war, it would amount to his eating rice mixed with her blood. If he secured peace, she would make a fire and consign herself to the flames (Udyoga Parva, 110: 100-101).

For both Kunti and Draupadi Krishna was their last resort. Both Kunti and Draupadi knew that he was Narayana himself, and both were his devotees. From a laukika perspective he was an outsider to their family. But as Narayana, which family did he belong to and for which family was he an outsider? Draupadi’s dependence on him was complete and unqualified. Dependence on him came naturally to these devotees - the relation between the devotee and Narayana made it perfectly logical. And “dependence on him” included telling him their wishes without hesitation or inhibition and expecting him to fulfill them.

Pandu’s second wife Madri provides an interesting instance of a woman’s craving for power. She knew she could enjoy position and authority only through her son. Kunti had three sons and she had none. So pleased was Kunti with the way Madri had served her all
those years with her that she willingly gave her Durvasa’s mantra, with which the sage had empowered her - in a manner of speaking. The jealous woman demonstrated her hunger for power when she invoked Narayana himself to get a son. She thought that with Narayana she would beget a son who could subdue Kunti’s children and give her a position of superiority vis-à-vis Kunti. She reminds us of Kaikeyi of Ramayana despite many differences between them. In contrast to her, Kaikeyi was neither jealous of Kaushalya nor did she ever want her son to conquer Rama.

In *Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata* there are, however, a few episodes suggesting that women were not really inherently powerless. In the episode on Draupadi’s disrobing, it was none other than Draupadi herself who put an end to her brother-in-law’s effort to disrobe her. Bhishma had rebuked Duryodhana for not making sense of the amazing spectacle that they had all witnessed, namely that clothes were coming out of Draupadi’s body unceasingly. How many pieces of clothes his women wore, he had ridiculed Duryodhana, as Dussasana continued pulling at her clothes. Draupadi cast an angry look at Duryodhana’s palace and all of a sudden a raging fire broke out there. Soon it started spreading. Bhishma shouted at Dussasana to stop harassing her; one look from her at the Kauravas and they would be burnt to ashes, he warned him. He still would not listen. Then Draupadi looked at the assembly in anger and Duryodhana, Dussasana, their ninety-eight brothers, Bhishma and Drona – all fainted. This was a supreme demonstration of her power. Duryodhana’s wife Bhanumati, Dhritarashtra and Gandhari, prayed to her as one would to a goddess, and pacified her.

As for Ganga, she had married Santanu by mistake. By the time she realized it, it was too late. After the marriage, she made his life utterly miserable. She tortured him in many ways to get away from him. She did succeed one day. She achieved her objective on her own strength; she did not take anyone’s help - neither any god’s nor any human’s.

But these are different and do not really question the fact that women derived their power from their men. Ganga and Draupadi were celestials, although the former was aware of her true nature, and the latter, only for a while, and that too, only once clearly, and once rather arguably. Ketuka, who was born of Aadi Saraswati’s anger in the early days of creation, and was to kill the fifteenth Sudraka Brahma but had to wait on account of Vishnu’ intervention till the aeon of Dwapara, was born as Draupadi with the sole purpose of drinking Dussasana’s
blood. Sudraka Brahma was Dussasana. That night after she had drunk Dussasana’s blood, she was no human. It was really the goddess of destruction who told Bhima that night that she would spare none of the Pandavas from her sword except Yudhisthira. When Draupadi said this, she knew who she was. But she was arguably unaware of her real nature when with one glance she set the women’s quarters of the Kaurava palaces on fire. That was the only occasion when she protected herself and punished her tormentors. She could not protect herself from Jayadratha and Kichaka. Jayadratha, her brother-in-law had tried to kidnap her when he found her alone in the forest during their vanavasa, and later when they were living in disguise, Kichaka wanted to molest her. In short, unlike Ganga, she lived the life of an ordinary mortal, except for that one night and those moments in the Kaurava court. A celestial’s power was not derivative, an ordinary woman’s was.

One of course did not have to be a celestial to have the power to burn. Gandhari had the destructive power that is reminiscent of Draupadi’s – she unknowingly reduced Durdasa to ashes thinking that he was Yudhisthira when she gazed at him after he removed her eye cover. Now unlike Draupadi she was no celestial born as human. However in that moment in doing what she did, she demonstrated the power of a celestial or a sage, whose power matched that of a celestial. Hers was the spiritual power that she had acquired from a life of self-denial. She had lived a life of tapas. She misused her taapasik power and ended up destroying the last Kaurava.

As already said, women, who were ordinary mortals, acquired and exercised their authority only through others. Quite expectedly they often tended to be manipulative. And then if at all in this regard Amba’s can be taken as a representative case, then they were conscious of the subtle power of their feminine assets. These together could constitute a formidable force to control men, and this might be why Bhishma advised Yudhisthira not to pay heed to women.

There were women too – very few indeed - in the world of Saarala Mahaabhaarata who were totally unconcerned with power although they were in a position to exercise it. The most striking of them was Devaki, who was not a Kaurava. The mother never asked for anything from her sons, Krishna and Balarama (who, incidentally, was Rohini’s son too). Then there was Suhani. When Bhishma gave Yudhisthira that advice about women, he surely did not think of Devaki. Or even Hidimbaki, Bhima’s asura wife. Suhani of course was not there in
the picture that time. Women like Devaki and Suhani are the marginalized among the marginalized in the poet’s story. And no wonder. Lust for power and quest for it is the stuff of a story, disinterestedness in power hardly is.

Now with whom do we begin our discussion of the Kaurava women? As far as Sarala was concerned, the Kuru dynasty started with the three children of Santanu: Chitravirya, Vichitravirya, and Bhishma (Aadi Parva I, 41: 269). Therefore Santanu’s wife Ganga, and his brother’s, i.e., sage Pareswara’s (better known as Parashara) wife Satyavati could be excluded from the list of the Kaurava women. However it is unclear why the great poet drew the line of the Kauravas the way he did. And then Ganga and Satyavati played such crucial roles in the destiny of that dynasty that their exclusion – on unclear grounds - does appear unjustifiable.

One might argue that Ganga was not a Kuru woman only technically. She married Santanu by mistake and not even for a moment during her married life was she committed to her marriage, and she did not keep it a secret from her husband - she was too tempestuous and too powerful for that. For her, Santanu as her husband was an error of enormous proportions, and she was hardly his wife notwithstanding the fact that she bore him seven children. She killed her sons - six of them – with utterly disgusting demonstration of cruelty and abandoned her newborn baby – her seventh son - without feeding him even a drop of her milk. She did not care whether it lived or died, as she so clearly and so crudely told Santanu; her harsh words do not compensate for the fact that these turned out to be the ichchaa mrityu for her son – death would not come to him until he wanted it to come. She did all those cruel things her husband simply to walk out of her marriage; she wanted to drive Santanu to desperation so that he would call her “gangi”. Marriage and motherhood did not make her a wife, and if Sarala viewed her as not belonging to the Kaurava family, it may be argued that he did have a point.

As for Satyavati, it was different. She was too involved in the affairs of the Kuru family to be regarded an outsider. Although Chitravirya and Vichitravirya were not born from her
womb, she was their mother in every other sense of the term. For a woman, she exercised considerable authority, and her authority came basically from her being the mother of the incomparable Vyasa, and the wife of the sage Pareswara. She was a remarkable woman in many ways. She was intelligent, caring and unselfish and always in control, no matter how difficult the situation was. She had a sound moral sense and tremendous self-confidence. She was more coerced than persuaded to have impermissible sex with Pareswara, and instantly their son was born. Incidentally, there are numerous instances in *Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata* of births of babies immediately after union; all of Kunti’s and Madri’s sons were born like this.

Now if Pareswara married Satyavati subsequently, it was due more to their exceptionally gifted son, who even the river goddess Ganga had coveted but had failed to own, than to fondness for her or social pressure on him or for reasons of conscience. As soon as he was born, Ganga drowned the boat, but she could not keep the baby, so great was his spiritual energy. The baby emerged from the river with the blessings of Narayana himself in the depths of the waters. The sage must not have wanted to leave such an asset behind with his mother and go his way. After the death of Chitravirya and Vichitravirya, Satyavati played a very important role in the Santanu household; she was the natural choice to play this role, being the mother-in-law of the widows of Chitravirya and Vichitravirya. The continuance of the family had to be ensured, and a successor to Santanu’s kingdom was to be found, and Satyavati had to persuade the widows to agree to have union with Vyasa for the purpose.

Whatever was the justification for the *niyoga* system, in *Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata* it is viewed both as a deviation from dharma, especially by the women involved and an imposition on women. The profoundly significant decision to turn to *niyoga* for her daughters-in-law was not really Satyavati’s. She on her own would have been extremely hesitant to suggest niyoga to her daughters-in-law, which is quite expected from her. She was a woman who had had impermissible sex herself under pressure and had never felt comfortable about it and was not unaware of the negative evaluation of her by the society, despite the fact that she was the mother of the incomparable Vyasa and that it was this union that had given her this son. The decision to turn to *niyoga* was Pareswara’s. She was only to execute it. She did consider her husband’s suggestion unethical and said as much to him but she did not disobey him. The job was not so simple and there arose many challenges as she
went about it. She handled them with intelligence, sensitivity, empathy, a sense of discrimination and conviction.

She herself had not had a normal childhood in some sense. She was born a princess, and out of wedlock, and she was not unaware of the unsavoury facts about her birth. When her mother could not have a child from her husband, in sheer desperation she chose to have union with several men, including those relatives with whom sex was forbidden, in order to have a child. But she felt very guilty about it. Since the way she got the child was known, no one came forward to marry her daughter. When Satyavati became twelve, her parents asked her to ferry people across the river Yamuna free of cost. Although not explicitly said, it was indeed an act of purification, like tapasyaa or yajna. What was odd about it was that it was a kind of surrogate act in the domain of dharma. The girl was not a sinner; her mother was, since she herself looked upon herself that way. In any case, Satyavati knew what sin was, what purification was and most importantly, what sacrifice was. She confronted her seducer, sage Pareswara, with moral courage and appealed to his moral sense. Her words were wise and arguments just.

She perfectly empathized with Ambika when she told her that she would be willing to pollute herself for the sake of the Kuru dynasty if her younger brother-in-law Bhishma consented to impregnate her. It was Satyavati’s decision to approach Bhishma; she did not seek her husband’s advice. Bhishma expressed his helplessness. It was only then that she approached her son Vyasa. He was reluctant, as he considered the proposal unethical for various reasons including the one that it involved sex with the younger brothers’ widows, but the great sage had no choice: in Saaralaa’s narrative, no action was more dharmik than obeying one’s mother.

Persuading Ambika and Ambalika was not easy. They were virtuous women and expressed their disagreement with Satyavati’s proposal. They ultimately chose to submit themselves to the niyoga system for the sake of the dynasty but they were very reluctant to have union with their elder brother-in-law. There was a limit to compromising with personal morals for the sake of the family, and that was what they could not bring themselves to cross. They were aware that there was a case for them to sacrifice their morals, but why the learned and the wise sage Vyasa consented to do something unethical was what they could not understand.
Satyavati told them about her mother: how she sacrificed her moral life in order to beget a child for the larger interest of the family. She also told them about their gain in material terms. There was her own example: her son brought her redemption. Their sons from Vyasa, she told them, would be strong, wise and virtuous. None of these could satisfy the widows; they believed that neither their sacrifice for a great cause nor the possibility of their having wise and celebrated sons would make up for the sin they were going to commit. They asked Satyavati who would take the responsibility for that sin. Venerable elders kept an eye on the women of the family so that they did not deviate from the moral path, they told her, but here she was, asking them to commit a sin. Satyavati’s answer was remarkable for its force of moral conviction: all the sin would accrue to her, she told them: ye paapa maana go laagibain muku (These sins would get attached to me) (Aadi Parva I, 84: 122). Words of such moral energy can come from one alone who is convinced that he or she is doing a completely unselfish act for an entirely legitimate objective.

A disappointed Satyavati went to Vyasa again when his child from Ambika turned out to be blind, which on that account left the succession problem unresolved. Ambika had died after giving birth. Vyasa protested; “how many sins are you making me commit”, he said in anguish (Aadi Parva I, 90: 8). She told him that having committed the sin, he should not be afraid of doing it again; once the inhibition was gone, fear must not stand on the way. She knew that her logic was poor, and she knew too that all arguments had been exhausted by then. She simply closed the topic and asked him to forget everything and impregnate Ambalika. That was the mother’s order for her son.

Ambalika told her that she was not destined to have a child, and she wanted the matter to rest at that. Satyavati gave her familiar arguments and added a new one. She played on a hidden aspiration of a mother: her son would live a life of prosperity and success. Her son would be the king, she told Ambalika, and that put all her inhibitions to rest but only temporarily as the future showed. She advised her to feel comfortable with Vyasa; her sister had not, which had resulted in the birth of a blind baby - joyless union would have such undesirable consequences, the effects of which might turn out to be long term and disastrous. Ambalika acted according to her advice. She gave birth to a healthy baby, who came to be known as Pandu.
The thought of her son becoming the king had subdued her conscience but only for a while, as it turned out. She was assailed by a sense of guilt, and the prospect of being the queen mother at the cost of dharma did not uplift her. Like all mothers, she only wanted her son to be successful and prosperous. Not long after the child was born, she left him in Satyavati’s care; she told her that she had honoured her word, that it was her responsibility now to look after her child and that she was going to sacrifice her life at the sacred Prayaga as penance for the sin she had committed.

Incidentally, Vyasa had a child – his third from the Santanu household - from Ambumati, the other wife of Vichitravirya. She was the daughter of the *sudra* king Kesava of the kingdom of Harikeshara. Ambumati was very depressed because Ambika and Ambalika had become mothers but she had remained childless. She had quietly and most diligently served Satyavati, and Satyavati wanted her to be happy. So she asked Vyasa to give her a son. This time there was no argument, no protestation and no persuasion between the mother and the son. And this was *niyoga* without a justification: the problem of continuance of the lineage was over when Ambika gave birth to her son, Dhritarastra and the issue of successor to Santanu was resolved when Ambalika gave birth to Pandu. There was no room for one more *niyoga* in the Kuru household. But such deviations from the *niyoga* system had to take place since it was not a system that was sensitive to the married woman’s aspirations for motherhood.

Satyavati made it happen. She sought no one’s permission for it. She did not feel handicapped to take this very important decision. She could not leave Ambumati disappointed and dejected. That apart, she surely had understood her feelings at the prospect of remaining childless when Ambika and Ambalika had become mothers. She must have understood her jealousy towards them. So she sent Vyasa to Ambumati. This wife of Vichitravirya was an intelligent person and did not have to be told that it was important for her to be at ease with Vyasa and also make him feel comfortable. In any case, there was no need for her to be told really. Unlike Ambika and Ambalika, Ambumati had no inhibitions in having union with Vyasa, who at that particular point of time was a great sage for her and not her elder brother-in-law. She was not burdened with any sense of guilt or sin. She had a spiritually gifted son from him who came to be known as the wise Vidura.
From the perspective of *Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata* union outside of wedlock was sinful. Although *niyoga* was considered a necessity under certain circumstances and was socially permissible, not everyone involved in it, whether the donor of the seed or its recipient, especially the latter, considered it sinless on that account. An unnecessary *niyoga* was considered impermissible and sinful. Ambumati wished to fulfill herself as a mother, so she could live with a sense of sin, if she felt that way, which she did not. She was not forced or persuaded to undergo *niyoga*. As for Vyasa, he obeyed his mother. But how could Satyavati not feel guilty? There is absolutely no evidence that she did. Was it because she knew that she had no self-interest in it? Or was it due to the moral strength that she got from her conviction that she was doing some good to a helpless and suffering woman? However if at all there is any relatively intelligible answer that the text provides, it is this: she knew that her son had the power to save her from any sins and that he certainly would come to her rescue, in case she was committing any sin on account of this unnecessary *niyoga*.

Two of the next generation of Kuru women, Kunti and Madri, also resorted to *niyoga*. Their husband Pandu was not impotent, unlike Satyavati’s father, but there was a curse on him that he would die during copulation. Following sage Agastii’s advice the two women chose to undergo *niyoga*. Their husband, Pandu, had expressed his great concern to the all-knowing sage about the end of his line in the Kuru family and sought his advice. The sage said that it was perfectly within the sanctions of dharma that under those specific circumstances his wives could have sons from others, and that that was precisely what their mothers-in-law had done. He knew that by the grace of the sage Durvasa, Kunti had a string of beads and also the mantra with her with which to invite any god for union with her, and the mantra was so powerful that no god or man could resist the invitation. He asked her to eschew humans and seek gods for union, so that the sin of copulation outside of wedlock would not accrue to her. Besides, gods’ sons would carry their attributes, and the mortal world would benefit from them in terms of the strengthening of dharma. He then told her that after making use of Durvasa’s gift, she should give the string of beads and the mantra to Madri so that she too could become a mother.
Although she was troubled by her conscience, the fear of sin did not really worry Kunti very much when she went for *niyoga*, not so much because she thought the reasons Agasti had given her were sound or because she had chosen gods for union; it was mainly because it had the sanction of Agasti himself, who she greatly revered and who she knew had the knowledge of the past, the present and the future. His was *guru vaakya*, the word of the ultimate spiritual authority – it was to be obeyed, irrespective of any skepticism one might have had about its merit: *kointaa boile tumhbe guru parama guru / tumbhara aagyaan ke anyastaa kari paaru* (Kunti said you are the ultimate guru / Who can disobey your command?) (*Aadi Parva* I, 173: 61).

But the way things happened, Kunti was unhappy. She underwent *niyoga* three times. When she went for her first *niyoga*, she had hardly any feeling of guilt, only a mixed sense of resignation and compulsion. When she invoked god Dharma, she said that she was doing so only because she was unable to get a child from her husband. The tone was prayerful and apologetic as well; it was as though she was feeling troubled for having to bother the god for her sake (*Aadi Parva* I, 176: 14-15).

Seven years after she decided to undergo *niyoga* again. It was entirely her decision. She did not consult Pandu. This was when she felt a rather strong sense of guilt. This was the first time she was doing something that was not strictly in conformity with the moral code. She knew that. She already had a son, and an heir to the throne of Hastinapura, and the purpose of *niyoga* was fulfilled. She must have been born at an inauspicious time, she said to herself, and condemned herself that she had to live an immoral life - the life of an *asati* (woman without virtue). But once it was over, nothing about it ever disturbed her peace.

She chose to undergo *niyoga* the second time for primarily selfish and political reasons, although it was Vyasa who had suggested to Pandu that Kunti must beget a child from the powerful god Pavana for their son to inherit the kingdom. Independent of course of Vyasa’s advice, Pandu’s queen wanted her son to inherit the kingdom, but she had come to the conclusion that one as sensitive, kind hearted and excessively committed to dharma as Yudhisthira, was unsuitable for kingship. By then Gandhari’s sons were born, and Vyasa had alerted Pandu that they would be powerful and wicked when they grew up. Kunti knew that
Gandhari was jealous of her and felt that because of his temperament Yudhisthira would be incapable of standing up to her and her sons. She needed a strong child capable of protecting her interests against those of Gandhari. She invoked god Pavana and the extraordinarily strong Bhima was born.

Seven years passed. Bhima was a very naughty child and quite aggressive in his behaviour too. Kunti was highly disappointed. Such a mischievous child would only grow into a wicked person, she thought. Besides he would be crude, unlearned in the shastras, and lacking sharpness of vision and discipline, would not be good at archery: balabanta murkha ye hoiba apandita / dhanu sahasra bidyaare ye nohiba nirjita (He would be strong and powerful, uncultured and uneducated / He would never excel in the knowledge of the shastras and in archery) (Aadi Parva I, 223: 283). She was certain that Bhima was unworthy of being the heir to the throne of Hastinapura; merely being physically strong and tough would not suffice. Although that was the thought about Bhima that had crossed her mind then, she was never troubled by it at any point of time later. She decided to undergo niyoga again. Again she did not seek her husband’s consent. And this time she was untroubled by any feeling of guilt or even uneasiness. She invoked god Indra, and from him she had Arjuna.

Sage Agasti had told her to pass on the string of beads and the mantra to Madri and had instructed Madri to serve Kunti devoutly, which she had done. In fact, the only picture one has of Madri in Sarala’s narrative till she received the mantra from Kunti is that of a very simple and somewhat naive person, a loving mother to Kunti’s sons and a dutiful sister-like youngster to Kunti. There was never any basis to suspect that she was serving her insincerely and out of some expectation. Now Kunti decided to pass on the mantra and the string to Madri. She had no reasons to feel disappointed with Arjuna the way she had with Yudhisthira and Bhima. There was no justification for her to undergo niyoga again, and there is no evidence in the text to suggest that she wanted to do so for the pleasure of it or for any other reason, and had to control herself. In fact there was some nagging feeling of guilt that sometimes troubled her. She had complex feelings about niyoga and had not always felt very comfortable about having resorted to it. On the one hand she had felt rather compelled but on the other she knew that the compulsion was from within. After three niyogas she was emotionally tired; she had realized that one’s own man understood one better than did the others, whether god or men, which is a very interesting point of view, despite its obvious
irrelevance to the system of niyoga. By raising this question at all, no matter how briefly and how fleetingly, Sarala introduced a new dimension into the discourse on niyoga – could a woman have union with a man and be emotionally indifferent to him or suffer his emotional indifference to her? In fact, emotional fatigue in relationships with those she had had union with constituted the immediate motivation for Kunti to pass on Durvasa’s mantra to Madri (Aadi Parva I, 231: 99-100).

There was an undercurrent of jealousy between the two wives of Pandu, which had never surfaced so far and now did in a very subtle way. Once Madri got the mantra, she knew her chance had come. She wanted to invoke a much more powerful god than all those Kunti had invited, so that her son could defeat all contenders to the throne including Kunti’s sons: gaandhaari putranta kointaa putranta jini / ye mohara kumara hou yekaanga nrupamani (Winning over the sons of Gandhari and of Kunti / This son of mine would become the sole emperor) (Aadi Parva I, 233: 15). This was her wish, her dream, when she invoked Narayana himself. As for Kunti, she dressed Madri, a stunningly beautiful woman, for the special occasion in order to make her look even more irresistible, but at the same time the jealous woman kept awake in her room, anxious to see which god was coming. When she saw Krishna, who had manifested himself in Madri’s presence, she had no feelings of devotion or spiritual delight. She could not even compose herself to greet him; she was completely unnerved thinking that now Madri’s son would conquer all and would become the monarch. Incidentally this was when and this was how Krishna entered the world of the Kurus in Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata. Sarala created here a dramatic conflict of powers: Krishna would not oblige Madri; she was like his mother, he told her, so union with her was unthinkable. And then of course Narayana could not be forced into something. At the same time sage Durvasa could not be dishonoured. Sage Durvasa had to come to resolve the problem, and he constrained his mantra appropriately so as to exclude Supreme Being. Madri then invoked god Aswini Kumara, and Nakula was born. Incidentally, she too did not seek her husband Pandu’s permission for resorting to niyoga. She was far too eager to have a child to think of such proprieties.

Kunti with the four children had gone to Hastinapura, leaving Madri behind in the forest with Pandu. She had heard that Gandhari had decided to cover her eyes with a band of cloth, so she went there to dissuade her from doing so. Madri was alone and one night she badly
missed Pandu. As she was lost in thoughts of him, she did not realize that the string of beads was in her hands. The mantra worked and Pandu arrived. Madri was shocked to see him and tried to resist him but he was under the control of the mantra, and he soon overpowered her. As he made love to her, the curse had its effect: both of them were killed by an arrow which came from the skies. Madri’s son was born, but the infant soon died because of want of nourishment. The god Aswini Kumara brought him back to life. This child, Sahadeva, was thus Pandu’s son and Aswini Kumara’s son too.

Dhritarastra and Gandhari did not have any issue; they were destined to have a daughter, as Vyasa told the king. But he was not interested in a girl child. He wanted a son who would continue the line. They did not resort to *niyoga*. They did not even think of it. The poet does not say why, but one could construct a possible reason from the narrative. First of all, theirs was not a very convincing case for *niyoga*. Then, as everyone knew, because of the inauspicious stellar configurations under which they both were born, they could marry only each other. Neither could marry any other. Prior to their marriage, everyone to whom either was engaged died. They might have feared that *niyoga* might turn out to be unsafe for the queen’s partner. After she married the *saahaadaa* tree, which died at once, Gandhari was supposed to have been rid of the negative effects of the constellations. But if she or her husband were still unsure of things, it was not unreasonable on their part. After all, Gandhari married Dhritarastra who was also born under a similarly inauspicious constellation. Therefore the fact that he survived his marriage would not necessarily constitute a guarantee that she was rid of the evil effects of the stars. In any case, the great sages performed a sacrifice in order to change what destiny had ordained for the couple. Ignoring details, because of Vyasa’s and Durvasa’s direct intervention, Gandhari came to have a hundred sons.

After the birth of Yudhisthira, Gandhari was neither restless to have a son nor envious of Kunti. But once she had her children, it did not take her long to develop negative feelings about Kunti. Many things had happened, and they all might have contributed to this change in her. Pandu had died, on account of which Kunti had lost her position and status, and Gandhari had started looking down upon her. Besides, Kunti’s sons had become more accomplished than hers in terms of the knowledge of weapons and Yudhisthira was considered to more worthy of the throne than Duryodhana by the family elders and subjects both. She might have felt insecure about her son’s inheriting the kingdom. Gandhari and
Kunti avoided each other. One day in a Shiva temple they fought in full view of the attendants. Gandhari shouted abuses at Kunti and soon they were pushing and pulling each other and hitting each other. The immediate provocation was that Gandhari, the queen, did not like Kunti, an ordinary woman, to worship Shiva in the same temple where she offered him worship.

Gandhari was an intelligent woman, and it did not take her long to realize that the balance of power had almost tilted against her with respect to Kunti. She wanted to be one up on Kunti by being the first on a particular morning to worship Shiva with a hundred golden champak flowers. He would be pleased with whoever worshipped him in that manner, the god of gods had told the quarrelling women one day. Gandhari knew that Kunti would not be able to get so many flowers of gold within a day. When she went to the temple in the company of her hundred sons with a hundred flowers of gold, she found that golden champaks were lying scattered all over the temple. Arjuna had brought hundreds of golden flowers from the treasury of the celestial treasurer, Kuvera, for his mother to worship Shiva first that morning. For the first time it dawned on Gandhari that with her hundred sons and her husband who was the king, and all the status and wealth that she enjoyed as the queen, she was nothing when it came to Kunti, who had lost her husband, had neither wealth nor status, and had only five sons. Shiva had made her realize this; otherwise the supreme vairabha was not the one to be pleased with something as useless as golden flowers.

After this incident, there is no mention in the narrative of Gandhari and Kunti fighting. Gandhari seemed to have come to terms with her situation vis-à-vis Kunti. Duryodhana virtually abused her when he got to know that she had married his father as a widow, notwithstanding the fact that she was the widow of only a tree. She had long ceased to be close to her sons and had no control over them. For instance, although she asked her sons to treat the Pandavas as their own and not to be hostile towards them, they simply ignored her advice. She did not also get any support from her husband on this matter. She had understood that hostility towards the Pandavas would bring disaster to her sons. She did not like Duryodhana’s appointing Sakuni as his minister. She knew her brother only too well. She asked Duryodhana not to listen to him. She warned him that Sakuni would work for the complete destruction of the Kauravas in order to avenge the killing of his father and his family, but her son completely ignored her sagacious advice.
The single parent Pandava family presents a contrast. It was a well-knit family, and Kunti was in control. Bhima’s hatred of Duryodhana and his brothers was as strong as the Kauravas’ hatred of the Pandavas. Kunti disliked Bhima’s attitude and often reprimanded him for this. She called him *dusta* (wicked) and often said that the atmosphere of the family was getting vitiated on his account. Bhima’s attitude did not of course change but he had to control himself in many ways. There was no way he could be dismissive about his mother’s words. Duryodhana was different; he considered his mother unclean. He felt greatly humiliated that his mother was a widow before she married Dhritarastra, which made him and his brothers a widow’s children which from his point of view made them no different from the Pandavas. In stark contrast, Bhima or for that matter any Pandava was never upset in the least that they were not sired by Pandu and not even by the same male. None of them was distressed by the fact that their mother had given birth to Karna before her marriage. There was no question of disrespecting the elders; disrespecting the mother was just unthinkable. It was this attitude of her children that was one major source of Kunti’s power, and this was where Gandhari lost out to Kunti. And Gandhari knew it.

After Duryodhana became king, her real status was, effectively, the marginalized mother rather than the queen mother. In any case, not just she, Dhritarastra, Bhishma, and Bhurishrava also were marginalized in the new king’s administration. However although Duryodhana almost never consulted these men on matters of the state, they expressed their views whenever they wanted to do so. But Gandhari never did, in Sarala’s narrative. Was it because her communication, if not bond, with Duryodhana had weakened, if not snapped altogether? She seems to have withdrawn herself almost completely. Major events passed by: attempt to disrobe Draupadi in the Kaurava court, the Pandavas going to the forest for twelve long years, the Kurukshetra war, but Gandhari said nothing to Duryodhana in connection with any of these. She seems to have become indifferent to things knowing that her sons were inexorably driving themselves towards their own destruction.

This silent woman was all words when she was looking in intense agony at the dead bodies of the dear ones in the Kurukshetra battlefield after the war was over. She had removed the cover from her eyes (*Naari Parva*, 11: 49). She asked the Pandavas how they could kill Bhurishrava, Somadatta, and Bhishma, the revered elders of the family and then Drona too,
their guru, who loved Arjuna so much. And Karna, their own brother! She asked Bhima how he could drink Dussasana’s blood and how, after mutilating Duryodhana he could kick his crown, and she asked Arjuna how he could kill Jayadratha, and make her daughter Dussila a widow. Was she not his sister too, she asked him. However her harshest words were reserved for someone else. With those she cursed Krishna, holding him solely responsible for the all the destruction. When he accepted her curse, she became silent again.

Those sharply accusing words to the victors were of the one who had lost completely, and those were honest words. She had already spoken dishonest words and had suffered - those were the words that came from the mother who was full of murderous hatred for the killer of her hundred sons. Those words were dipped in the venom of revenge. The Pandavas had come to pay their respects to Dhritarastra and her after winning the war and solicit reconciliation. With them were Krishna and Vidura. At that time the poor mother did not know that one of her hundred sons was still alive, and had also come with them. She was aware of the superhuman power she had acquired by living a life of self-denial, which was akin to a life of tapas; she knew that if she took off the cover from her eyes and cast an angry look at Yudhisthira, he would be burnt to ashes. She used mean cunning to lure Yudhisthira to remove the cover from her eyes. Her words were false. At the instance of all-knowing Krishna, whom no falsehood could deceive, the unsuspecting Durdasa removed his mother’s eye cover and perished. Vidura accused Gandhari of killing her only surviving son and asked her to cover her eyes again.

Kunti lost her husband when she had gone with the children – her sons, and Madri’s son, Nakula - to Hastinapura to persuade Gandhari not to cover her eyes. It appears somewhat ironical that Gandhari wanted Kunti’s son to remove her eye cover with the intention of killing him. Of course, Gandhari’s ill will for Kunti’s sons was perfectly matched by Kunti’s ill-will for Gandhari’s sons. Gandhari and Kunti were no well-wishers of each other but they did not want to transmit their disaffection to their sons when they were small. But in course of time their attitude changed. Knowing the might of the Pandavas and the hostility of Bhima towards Duryodhana, etc., Gandhari had developed great anxiety and concern for her children. She was afraid. There was no goodwill left in her for the Pandavas by the time their education was over. In the end, the loss of all her sons, her conviction that the great Kaurava warriors had been killed in unethical ways, the brutal manner in which her son Dussasana
was done to death, and the totally unfair way in which her eldest son, Duryodhana, was killed had filled her with intense hatred for the Pandavas. She wanted revenge and she knew that she had the power to take revenge. When the Pandavas came, she knew the time had come. It was just that she had not taken it into account the fact that it was Krishna who was protecting them. Yudhishthira could not be killed, Krishna told her, because for dharma not to disappear from the world, Yudhishthira’s remaining alive was absolutely necessary.

Kunti’s had lost her goodwill for the Kauravas long ago when they tried to kill Bhima and afterwards, all her sons and her in that house of death. She, like Gandhari, remained the mother, but never became the embodiment of motherhood. At the same time, one could empathize with her; it is entirely understandable if she ceased to have goodwill for those who had poisoned one of her sons and had later manipulated to burn her sons alive. Life was difficult as she and her sons had to hide themselves in the forest to escape the attention of the Kauravas. Then they had to go from place to place incognito, begging for food. Draupadi’s humiliation, the arrogance of the Kauravas, thirteen years of hard life suffered by her sons and daughter-in-law, and thirteen long years of separation from her sons, among others, had hardened her against the Kauravas. She was the one who brayed for Kauravas’ blood, almost as loudly as did Draupadi, and sometimes even more loudly than her.

The Pandavas did not know that Duryodhana had fled from the battlefield. He was not to be found in the battlefield, so the Pandavas were under the impression that he was already dead in that fierce fight in the darkness of that terrible night when it was not always clear who was killing who. However, they were not certain. That was when Kunti rebuked Bhima and Krishna bitterly for not having been able to kill Duryodhana (Gadaa Parva, 37-39: 88-116). Her language was so crude, so abusive and harsh that Bhima lost his cool. He told her that she was speaking stones, not words: tohara bole go paasaana jhadai (From your words stones are falling). On the following day when the Pandavas returned home, Kunti asked Krishna whether Duryodhana was still alive. If he was, then she would commit suicide, she told him. Great was her joy when she learnt that Bhima had killed Duryodhana.

Although Kunti was a strong woman, she had given in to depression after her husband’s death and wanted to leave her children in the care of Vyasa and commit suicide, but the great sage dissuaded her from doing so. Once she realized that she had to look after her children,
she got over her depression and attended to her duties with great courage. She responded adequately to the special circumstances in which she found herself. Her sons were still very young when they had to leave Hastinapura, but this did not happen because of her decision. When she was in Hastinapura, the elders took all decisions about her sons, whether it was their education or their going to Varanavanta. After the wax palace incident at Varunavanta, Kunti, who ordinarily would not have taken any decisions about her sons on her own, did take some. She allowed Bhima to marry Hidimbiki, which was not an insignificant decision, considering, most importantly, that she came from a very different culture. Such a thing had never happened in the family of the Kurus. She decided to give Bhima to the demon called Kumbhira, and it was also her decision to send Bhima to the demon Bakasura. She finally became the cause (if only at the laukika level, for the nature of her marriage was divinely ordained) of the marriage of the five Pandavas to Draupadi. Incidentally, although Kunti and Vyasa were involved in Draupadi’s marriage, Draupadi’s coming to the Pandava family in the first place was Krishna’s doing. Unknown to everyone except Vyasa, he had manipulated the archery test in such away that only Arjuna could win it. In any case, Kunti played no part in the other marriages of Bhima and Arjuna, for instance the latter’s marriage to Krishna’s sister, Subhadra, and in the marriage of her grandchildren. She was not there to see her vaanaprasthi (one on vaanaprastha) eldest son marrying the Odia girl, Suhani.

Like other women, she too ceased to be the decision maker in the family once her sons grew up. Draupadi arrived, and Krishna got linked with the destiny of the Pandavas. Krishna was an outsider, as was Sakuni. Neither was a Kuru. But they, especially Krishna, needles to say, received tremendous good will and affection in the Kuru family. As for Sakuni, Duryodhana’s trust on his uncle was as great as his affection for him. Krishna was so dear to Bhima and Arjuna that they would brook no insult to him. Once Bhima was going to hit his mother with his mace for insulting Krishna, and on a certain occasion Arjuna was going to kill Yudhisthira for an identical offence. In a certain situation he was going to shoot the infallible divine arrow, paasupata, at Bhima when he found his behaviour towards Krishna insulting. On each occasion, it was Krishna who restrained them. As for Draupadi, her dependence on him exceeded her dependence on even her husbands. At the most devastating moment of her life, when she learnt that Aswasthama had killed her sons, Sarala’s Draupadi asked Krishna, but none of her husbands, for the killer’s head.
However, from a non-laukika or cosmic point of view, Krishna was not an outsider at all; he told Vyasa that his relation with Arjuna was eternal. Being the mother of Dharma, who he revered, she was like his mother too, he once told Kunti. In the Pandava family Yudhisthira took most of the important decisions, often in consultation with Krishna and with the support of Vyasa. Some very important decisions were collectively taken, such as the one to go for a final war against the Kauravas. But Kunti was not involved in certain other major decisions like performing the raajasuya yajna.

There was one decision that she took for herself entirely on her own. As noted earlier, the only decision the woman could take was to take her own life. Or something tantamount to that, like abandoning family life and going for vaanaprastha. She surprised everyone when she said that she was joining her brother-in-law Dhritarastra, and sister-in-law, Gandhari, for vaanaprastha. She was firm in her resolve, and the tearful pleadings of her sons had no effect on her. Gandhari asked her why she was renouncing the comforts of the palace when her son was the king. Her sons asked her why, after suffering with them and for them in difficult times, she was leaving them at the time of their prosperity. She told them how she had been a loser in the war and how she had grieved in silence all those days after the war for her grandsons, Ghatotkacha and Abhimanyu, and her dear son Karna. Later when alone with Yudhisthira, she told him that she was going to the forest to serve the old, blind and helpless elders in order to save him from their curse.

It appears that Kunti handled the feeling of guilt quite well. From that point of view, she was a practical woman. With respect to Karna, in Sarala’s version, she did not carry a load of guilt but she felt a very acute sense of loss. She knew she had been unfair to her eldest son. She had tried to make amends but it had given her no comfort. In any case she had failed in her efforts in this regard. When she heard that her son was growing up in Radhevi’s house, she went there with her children and asked them to pay respects to their eldest brother. She wanted to take him with her, but the aggrieved son did not agree. Karna was a child. The child had felt deeply hurt. He had felt abandoned by his mother. He did not say so explicitly, but quite clearly this was in his mind. He asked his mother how she could give the status of her “eldest born” to Yudhisthira – ye duja putra hoi go bahilaa jyestha naama (This (boy) being the second son, bore the name of the first born) (Aadi Parva, 252: 72), which was an indirect way of asking her how she could abandon him.
Draupadi emerged directly out of the *yajna* fire. That was how she was “born”. From the same sacred fire, Shikhandi had emerged and then had Dhristadyumna. But the *yajamaana* (the person for whom the *yajna* was being performed), Drupada, was discontented. Consumed with the dark passion to destroy his childhood friend Drona and the Kauravas, Drupada repeatedly told Vyasa, who was performing the *yajna*, that he needed a daughter, who she wanted to give in marriage to Arjuna, following Shiva’s advice. The great god had told him that it was only through that alliance that he would be able to defeat the Kauravas (*Aadi Parva* II, 957: 107-108). He was seeking revenge for his humiliation in the hands of Drona. When in Drona’s custody, without his knowledge, Duryodhana and his brothers had tortured him, those very people who he had defeated earlier. In contrast, he had been treated very respectfully by Arjuna, who had defeated and imprisoned him. For some reason it was not easy to obtain a girl from the sacred fire. After some very special efforts by Vyasa, the sacred fire of the *yajna* yielded a girl. The girl was called Draupadi by her father.

Draupadi was thus born to destroy the Kuru dynasty; she was, indirectly, the cause of the Kurukshetra war, in which along with the Kauravas and Drona, her father and brothers and her own sons were killed. In any case, one is born destined to do or be something or the other. Although she was born in this extraordinary manner, she lived her life like any human and died an ordinary human’s death. Only just one or two occasions did she act like the celestial that she was. Krishna alone knew this truth about her but he never said anything to her in this regard.

If a woman’s power in the world of Mahabharata flowed from her relationship with men, then there could have been no woman in that world more powerful than Draupadi. Her husbands were great warriors; in their respective disciplines, Bhima and Arjuna were considered to be warriors almost without equals. Her father and brothers were great warriors too and Krishna was her *sakhaa* (roughly, friend). She was theoretically the most powerful woman, and in fact, she ultimately got whatever she had wanted, except perhaps once: she
had asked Krishna for Aswasthama’s head when she learnt that he had killed all her sons. Krishna gave her, not Aswasthama’s head, but his weapons, which he had got by guile. He offered no explanations. She did not ask for any. The poet says that she was happy at the disempowerment of her sons’ killer (Kaainsikaa Parva, 51: 109-110). For once, she had to be content with much less than what she had wanted; however, the text does not say that she had to struggle within herself to accept what she got – it was almost like whatever Krishna gave her was acceptable to her. In any case, the anxiety, humiliation, misery and suffering that she went through can hardly be associated with the powerful.

Incidentally, in Sarala’s story, Aswasthama was neither humiliated by the Pandavas nor cursed by Krishna. His body was never disfigured. He did try to destroy the Pandavas with his special divine weapon but ended up killing Abhimanyu’s wife Uttara and their son in the mother’s womb. Krishna gave the dead infant life. But he did not curse Aswasthama. After this, Aswasthama retired to an ashram, and lived the life of an ashramite. In the new world the virtuous Yudhisthira became the king, and the brahmin Aswasthama returned to the life a brahmin was supposed to live and from which his father had strayed. The Pandavas and Draupadi met him during their last pilgrimage. Their meeting was cordial.

The only punishment Aswasthama seems to have had ever received in Sarala’s retelling was from Duryodhana. In those dying moments of his life he had condemned him for his heinous act of killing Draupadi’s sons and rejected him.

To return to Draupadi. Consider her harrowing experience in the Kaurava court. She found herself in a situation where her powerful husbands could not help her; for them it was a situation where there was a clash of values, and they painfully chose not to intervene on her behalf. She did not deserve the humiliation that she suffered; by no stretch of logic could it be said that she was responsible for it, even in the least. She had done nothing to earn the ire of Karna, Duryodhana or any of his brothers and their relatives. Some versions of the Mahabharata story mention an episode in which she had mockingly called Duryodhana “blind like his father”; in Sarala’s version, it was Bhima, not Draupadi, who had once said it to Duryodhana. Similarly, unlike in some versions, she had never said or done anything in Sarala’s version to offend Karna either at the time of her swayambara or later. Karna had taken the archery test and had failed, as had Duryodhana. Karna was not the kind of person
who would stoop to humiliate a woman out of either frustration or jealousy. Neither was Duryodhana. Besides, Kunti’s first born knew that she was his younger brothers’ wife. In Sarala’s story Karna played no role whatsoever in the humiliation of Draupadi. Sakuni was the one who had proposed that she be disrobed. He was the one who said that she deserved no better treatment as she was shameless and that she called herself a sati when she lived with five men. She must be disrobed, Sakuni had said, so that one knew how she was a sati. Taken literally, these words of his make no sense; a reasonable construction of what he said could be that Draupadi was actually a public woman, and a public woman had no right to privacy about her body. From another point of view, disrobing a woman in public was as far as a narrative could go in those times to express the idea that the body of a public woman belonged to the public. Duryodhana found Sakuni’s logic sound enough to order her disrobing.

What is worth noting is that no one in the court contested Sakuni’s proposal in this version, unlike in the canonical one. Sarala does not tell us why. The following could be a likely explanation. It is possible that at least some courtiers from the larger Kuru family itself were actually skeptical about the validity and the morality of Draupadi’s marriage. It is unlikely (at least unclear from the narrative) that they discussed the matter among themselves in a way that would have drawn attention to the topic, leave alone discussing it in public. There were practical considerations, including the one that she was, after all, a member of the illustrious Kuru clan. Besides, some might have been genuinely uncertain about the immorality of her situation. They might have considered that she, born out of fire, was born pure, and remained so, despite her having five husbands, and further that the venerable Vyasa had consented to her marriage. However, if they were unsure that her marriage was immoral, they probably were also unsure that they must contest when someone pointed an accusing finger at it on grounds of morality. This lack of clarity in their minds may be understood in terms of the prevalent belief and value systems in that society, as figured out by Sarala.

But there was absolutely no lack of certainty in Hidimbiki’s mind about this matter. Hidimbiki was Bhima’s wife. She told their son Ghatotkacha, who was going to participate in Yudhisthira’s raajasuiya yajna, not to bow to Draupadi because she was not a virtuous woman. Hidimbiki came from a non-Sanatana, aasurik culture, although she was very knowledgeable about the Sanatana culture. She had in fact brought up Ghatotkacha in that
culture, surely because his father belonged to it. She was aware of the prevalent social system among the Sanatana elite. Thus she told her son: *baabu yekaa purusaku paanca stiri atai jugate / stiri hoi paanca pati gachchai kemante* (My son, it is fine for a man to have five wives / But how is it right for a woman to have five husbands) (*Sabhaa Parva* II, 195: 30). She had no doubt that Draupadi was an *asati*, who lived an immoral life. She knew that Draupadi was born out of fire and must have known too that her marriage had the sanction of Vyasa, but none of these had any influence on her thinking. So what she was born of fire, she lived an impious life! In her perspective sanctity of one’s birth could not exempt one from the immorality of one’s living.

And what did Yudhisthira have in mind when he told Bhima about Draupadi: *yeta sahaje pancu paandavanka naari / abhayankari hoi yehi atai duraacaari* (As it is, she is the wife of the five Pandavas / Being fearless she is wicked) (*Swargaarohana Parva*, 60: 65)? In their last ever journey in the Himalayas, she had just fallen, and Bhima implored Yudhisthira to stop and attend to her. It was in this context that the eldest Pandava said the above about her, which was indeed a judgement on her. Now did he suggest that her being the wife of five men was an impropriety, or at least an oddity? Or did he mention it as a mere fact? But it could not be so, because then *sahaje* in the sense of “as it is” would lack interpretation. Or did he say that being the wife of all the Pandavas (in which interpretation the first line of the couplet gives the reason for her fearlessness) she was fearless? In that context *abhayankari* (being without fear) has a distinctly negative import – she was unafraid of doing improper and wrong things; she was an unscrupulous person. But there are other questions that arise in this context. Did he think she was more powerful by virtue of being the wife of all the Pandavas, rather than just one of them, say Arjuna’s or his? Was Subhadra less powerful because she was only Arjuna’s wife? In fact, the best interpretation of the first line of the couplet is the first of these, namely, that there was clear impropriety or at least oddity in her being the common wife of the five Pandavas. He called her *duraacaari*, the doer of improper and immoral action. Was she a *duraacaari* merely because she was *abhayankari* or also because she was the common wife of five men? Quite obviously these two were related in her case. Now given what her most virtuous husband said about her, should it surprise at all that there were always others who had considered Draupadi’s marriage unacceptable?
Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata is silent about how Draupadi had felt when she realized that she was going to be married to all the Pandavas. Did she not feel emotionally disturbed when she got to know that Arjuna was only one of five she was going to marry? She was intelligent and had the knowledge of the right and the wrong; did she have a doubt that what was going to happen to her was not ethical? She did not take long to give her consent, although only indirectly. The language of consent is not just “yes”, it is sometimes “not no” too, and only the insensitive would fail to notice the difference. What choice did she really have with Krishna and Vyasa supporting the proposal? Her father had not liked it at all and had vehemently protested, but he gave in to the venerable Vyasa and Krishna. Their argument was based, not on the prevalent social or moral systems, but on their knowledge of her past life; they said it was ordained that she would have five husbands. However, an argument based on alaukika facts might have been considered too delicate to obtain general social acceptance for the unusual marriage – this, despite the fact that Vyasa and Krishna were believed by all to have the knowledge of the past, the present and the future.

Draupadi was the only one in the universe of Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata who had more than one husband. Ambika, Ambalika, Kunti and Madri had all experienced more than one person, but none had more than one husband. These women had all undergone niyoga. By Kunti’s time the niyoga system had weakened considerably. No one in the family of the Kurus underwent niyoga after Madri. It may be recalled that sage Agasti had advised Kunti to beget children from gods, and not humans, an advice that fairly clearly indicated that niyoga was losing social acceptance. Amba, Ambalika and Kunti viewed union with men other than their husband as highly unclean, immoral and sinful in all situations. As for Madri, she did not invoke another god after she gave birth to Nakula; it was her husband she longed for. The only institution that allowed a woman to experience more than one man in certain situations was weakening. However, even in such times, no one thought of Kunti as a public woman.

Now Sakuni called Draupadi a public woman. Her living with five men was unconnected with succession or even motherhood; therefore it is entirely understandable if some like him were inclined to consider her situation unethical. The fact that it was institutionalized through marriage did not impress Sakuni. Going by what he said in the Kaurava court, one would observe that in his view Draupadi’s marriage lacked social and moral legitimacy. He surely
did not take the argument based on her earlier existence seriously. Rather strangely, after her marriage, no one ever used it in support of it.

The Pandavas of course had a different justification – they were only obeying their mother’s word. That was their dharma. Yudhisthira told his mother that they had got a nice fruit (*susanca phala gotaae*), and from inside the house she asked them to share it among themselves, the natural thing a mother would tell her children (i.e., not to fight and share the goody). When Bhima told her that it was not a fruit but a woman, Kunti said that even then they should do what she had asked them to do – *tumbhe saadhu putra mora bacana na kara aana* (you virtuous sons of mine, do not disobey my word). Yudhisthira readily agreed (*Aadi Parva* II, 984: 252-258). One wonders why Yudhisthira, a person committed to a life of virtue, told his mother a lie. Why did he choose indirect speaking in preference to the direct style? Indirect speaking can be manipulative. Why did he choose a metaphor? A metaphor is at best a half-truth, and a half-truth is a lie. More importantly, it is surprising that he so readily agreed with his mother’s strange suggestion. He did not suggest it to her that since the “fruit” was a woman, there was a case for her to reconsider her instruction to them. But let us not linger on this matter any longer. We would only say at this point that a tentative explanation of his behaviour is that he had fallen for Draupadi. One might argue that too much must not be made of the words he said to his mother (the excited son had wanted to give his mother a surprise, thus there was no manipulative intent in his use of the style of indirect speaking), and that in the absence of clear justification, it would be unfair to question his intention, granted even that he had developed some strong weakness for her. Language is almost never harmless: innocent-looking words thoughtlessly uttered can have unpredictable consequences.

Obeying mother’s word was virtuous action, and disobeying it was sin. This was the value everyone subscribed to in the society, not just the Pandavas. It is another matter that in actual practice there were differences among people. For the Pandavas, it was almost an absolute value (“almost” because it tended to get undermined in Bhima’s and Arjuna’s case when it came into conflict with their commitment to Krishna. Quite understandable since Krishna is a deep and absorbing idea and a profound longing. Krishna is the ultimate madness.). But for Karna it was not. He disobeyed his mother Kunti when she asked him to join the Pandavas, his own, in the Kurukshetra war because it clashed with another value, namely standing up
for the one who had implicit trust on him and depended on him a lot. So in his judgement what was unacceptable could not gain moral sanction merely because it was based on the mother’s suggestion. This might have been Sakuni’s point of view too.

If he thought that the five brothers’ desire for Draupadi was the basis of her unusual marriage, he was thinking in almost Kunti’s terms. When Kunti did not change her suggestion even after learning the truth about what her sons had brought home that day, it was because she had sensed that all her sons desired Draupadi: kointaaye jaananti je paandavankara prakruti (Kunti knew the Pandavas’ nature) (Aadi Parva II, 894: 258). In any case whatever the reasons for the marriage, some considered it unacceptable — an immoral relationship could not be legitimized through marriage. If anything, such an act undermined the dignity and the sanctity of the institution of marriage. The five brothers had camouflaged their living in sin with the institution of marriage.

Was it this view that led eventually to the attempt to disrobe Draupadi? Was the disrobing only a symbolic act to condemn the camouflaging? Was it merely accidental that Sakuni happened to be the one who on a certain day suggested that she be publicly disgraced? One thing is certain: Sakuni did not want her disrobed in order to satisfy his or his nephews’ lust for her. None of them was a Kichaka or a Jayadratha. Duryodhana’s order to disrobe her (and thereby humiliate her husbands too) could be seen as an crude expression of his disdainful rejection of her marriage.

All said and done, what Sakuni really thought about this matter is a different question altogether. In the context of Sarala’s narrative, it is by no means a meaningless question, although it is one which can hardly be answered with some certainty. We know that Sarala’s Sakuni lived virtually two distinct lives, one for the world, in which he was Duryodhana’s most trusted adviser, and another for himself and for Krishna, in which he worked for the destruction of the Kauravas and served the avatara in the fulfillment of his cosmic objective. For such a person who can say with certitude how he really looked upon Draupadi’s marriage? When a knowledgeable person lives two lives, the one he lives for himself can be said to be the more honest, more authentic. Since the life Sakuni lived for himself and Krishna was more honest (for this Krishna himself was the witness in Sarala’s retelling), he
did not necessarily believe in what he said about Draupadi in the Kaurava court. Draupadi’s marriage was really of no interest to him; he had to exploit it only to achieve his end.

Turning now to decision-making, Draupadi was excluded from it on the matter of her marriage. As already said, she did consent to marry five men in whatever form, if consent has any meaning in the absence of an alternative. Then giving consent is not always the same thing as deciding. Her views were hardly sought when the Pandavas decided on various matters; for instance, when they decided to perform raajasuiya yajna or when Yudhishthira decided to marry Suhani. She was with him at that time, as were his brothers. He consulted his brothers, but not her. Arjuna, who among her husbands she cherished most, did not seek her consent when he brought Subhadra home. The one who involved her in what arguably was the most important decision of the family, was Krishna. He sought her opinion regarding the choice between peace and war with the Kauravas. However there was nothing exclusive about her in this respect; he had also sought Kunti’s opinion.

Unlike Sita of the Ramayana, it was not her decision to live in the forest with her husbands. It was Yudhishthira’s and Krishna’s decision. In terms of Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata she was neither exulted nor sad; she just accepted it (to say “was resigned to it” would not be quite correct; even “accepted” is not the best expression, for she had no agency in the matter.). The contexts of course were different for Sita and Draupadi. Since the one for Sita is well known, we might concentrate on the one for Draupadi. When the Pandavas left for the forest, they had to take their mother and wife with them; that was how Kunti, Draupadi and Subhadra were with them. After about two months when they decided to go deep into the forest, they invoked Krishna. Krishna arrived, and then as he invoked Vyasa, the great sage arrived. Yudhishthira told Krishna about the circumstances that had led to their going to the forest again and requested him to take with him their mother, Draupadi, and his sister Subhadra. He did not want them to undergo the great hardships of forest life. Both Vyasa and Krishna knew that Draupadi’s being with the Pandavas would serve a divine purpose – she would be the cause of Kichaka’s death. Krishna told Yudhishthira that Draupadi’s being with them was preordained and left with Kunti and Subhadra. Thus the narrator Sarala protected Subhadra from being accused as the wife who did not share her husband’s adversities and at the same time denied Draupadi even a good word for sharing her husbands’ misfortune and hardship.
Despite all the above, no one is really so greatly constrained that he or she has no free space where she takes a decision about her personal life. After Dussasana dragged her by her hair, she kept her hair loose, which she tied only after Bhima poured Dussasana’s blood on it. Incidentally, it does not seem to have been her idea initially to keep her hair loose until she had Dussasana’s blood to tie it up with; it is more likely that she kept her hair untied when she heard Bhima take that terrible oath. In any case, it was her decision, and in the end, as she fell to her death, she was most harshly condemned by Yudhisthira for this. Her loose hair thirsted for Dussasana’s blood, and Yudhisthira considered her responsible for the death of his brothers. He condemned her most emphatically as a sinner.

Subhadra was not just Arjuna’s wife; she was also Krishna’s sister. Balarama’s sister as well, although she was a great deal closer to Krishna, who understood her, than to Balarama, for whom such things as understanding her wants and feelings etc. were inconsequential. And she knew who Krishna was and who Balarama was. Like everyone else, she knew what it was to be their sister, Krishna’s sister.

Sometimes one gets the impression that in Sarala’s narrative she is more Krishna’s sister than a member of the Pandava family. When in the beginning of their vanavaasa (living in the forest) after losing the game of dice, Yudhisthira asked Krishna to take the women with him, he referred to Kunti as “our mother Kunti” (aambha kointaa je maataa), Draupadi, as just Draupadi, and Subhadra as “your sister” (tumbhara bhagini). One wonders whether he meant that in spite of her marriage to a Pandava, her primary identity remained precisely that. One might suggest that he did not refer to her by her name because it was not good form to refer to or call one’s younger brother’s wife by her name. It is still a weak linguistic prohibition in the conservative families in Odisha. But then there surely were alternative terms (for instance a kinship term – in contemporary Odia, bohu), which he could have used. Or did he want to be respectful to Krishna by referring to Subhadra as Krishna’s sister, rather than Arjuna’s wife?
Draupadi was not the only wife of Bhima and Arjuna, each of whom had married more than once. And interestingly, Arjuna did not marry anyone after his marriage to Subhadra. In fact, in Sarala’s narrative, no Pandava tied the knot after that event, barring the very special case of Yudhisthira, who married during his vaanaprastha. Apart from Subhadra, the wives of Bhima and Arjuna stayed back in their respective native places and did not come to live with them in the Pandavas’ home. This was how the clash or the mixing of cultures was avoided in the Pandava family. In addition to possible unpleasantness at home (recall the quarrel between Draupadi and Hidimbaki), there might have arisen difficulties as far as succession was concerned, and then all these might not have been viewed favourably by the subjects at large.

Here is an example of one kind of tension that would perhaps have plagued the family if all the women the Pandava brothers married had lived together. Hidimbaki and Draupadi met just once and they fought. Draupadi thought of herself as mahaa sati (most virtuous woman) (Gadaa Parva, 102: 202). And, as we know, Hidimbaki looked down upon her since in her view she was asati. She had instructed her son Ghatotkacha, who was going to participate in Yudhisthira’s raajaswiya yajna, not to bow to Draupadi there. Apprehending that harm might come to her son, she had also come to give him cover. Draupadi felt offended when Ghatotkacha did not show due respect to her in the presence of the elders, sages and princes, who had assembled for the yajna. She cursed him that he would die in the battlefield without fighting, which was considered the most inglorious way a kshatriya could die. Wild with anger, Hidimbaki rushed in and cursed Draupadi that her sons would die early. In this she had gone one step ahead of Ganga; if Ganga cursed Santanu’s toddlers, Hidimbaki cursed the yet unborn children of Draupadi.

Ordinarily unpleasantness would be expected between Draupadi and Subhadra because Arjuna had married Subhadra for love (or might pass off as “love”) and of all her husbands Draupadi loved Arjuna the most, something which Yudhisthira at least knew. But the narrative provides no example of any unpleasantness or tension between them. In the narrative there is no mention of Arjuna doing something noticeable to make them feel at ease with each other, neither is there any mention of Subhadra living in the Pandava household in subservience to Draupadi. There is no instance of their meeting one-to-one. Whenever they
met, there were others present: for instance, when they were mourning over the killing of Abhimanyu, and later, when Aswasthama’s divine arrow killed the pregnant Uttara and her son in her womb. These of course were no occasions for fighting.

There was one occasion in which the members of the Pandava family were fighting, in the presence of Krishna. Each was claiming the sole credit for the success in the Kurukshetra war. After her husbands had spoken, Draupadi spoke. She asserted that it was the spiritual energy of her sati twa (virtue) that had brought them victory. For once the one, who had never forgotten Krishna, forgot him. Subhadra joined the issue with them. She said that whatever they all were saying was dead wrong. She indeed was the root cause of the victory. Krishna was her brother and Abhimanyu, her son; it was to avenge Abhimanyu’s killing that Krishna destroyed the Kauravas. On this matter Draupadi’s and her ego found expression in different ways - unlike Draupadi she did not forget Krishna; for her, he was indeed the agent, although she considered herself the cause.

Subhadra was no pushover; she was only unassuming and completely devoid of ambition. In contrast to Draupadi, she was not revengeful. When Aswasthama killed her sons, Draupadi wanted him killed; when Aswasthama killed Subhadra’s daughter-in-law, Uttara, and the child in her womb, she did not ask for the killer’s head; she simply wanted Krishna to restore her grandson to life. When her son was killed, she did not ask anyone, neither her husband nor her brother, for anyone’s head. It was Arjuna who sought revenge. Draupadi was haughty, strong willed, intolerant and arrogant. Subhadra and she both loved Arjuna. If there was no open clash between them, it was because of Krishna - they both derived their confidence and strength from him. Draupadi could not afford to be hostile to her protector’s sister; neither could Subhadra to Draupadi, who, she knew, was very dear to her brother.

Subhadra did not seem to elicit any hostility from the Kaurava quarters. When Arjuna lost his freedom after Yudhisthira lost him in the game of dice, no one talked about the status of his wife Subhadra. Perhaps no one dared. Neither friend nor foe - no one ever said an unkind thing about her; neither did anyone, a word of praise. Everyone left her alone. No one dragged her to the problems that beset the Pandavas. Interestingly, she was the only one of the Pandava family who Krishna could have but did not consult when he went to Duryodhana as Yudhisthira’s emissary. She was a Pandava woman, yet she was not.
Subhadra did not join her husband when he went on vaanaprastha along with his brothers and Draupadi. No one asked or advised her to – no sage or any elder. At the same time no one persuaded her, against her will, to stay on in the palace. The poet says just nothing about her in this context. As for Draupadi, all that is said in the narrative is that she went with her husbands; one gets the impression that she did what was the most natural thing for her to do. Unlike Kunti, she was not the queen mother. When Kunti decided to join Dhritarashtra and Gandhari for vaanaprastha, it came as a surprise; she had to explain why she had decided to go. The situation was different for Draupadi. Subhadra was in effect the queen mother. But Parikshya (Parikshita) was not all that young, so that could hardly be a justification for her not to be with her husband during the last part of his life.

The wise Yudhisthira decided to go for vaanaprastha when he knew the time for it had arrived. With Krishna having left the world, Kali yuga had arrived. The code of the times, yuga dharma, was going to change, and adharma was going to rule. No one would be able to escape from the grips of sin. Therefore he decided it was time for him and his brothers to leave. This must have constituted a good enough reason for Subhadra to leave for vaanaprastha as well. Probably the poet wanted his audience to know that Krishna’s sister was not born to suffer hard life in the snowy mountains.

The swargaarohana (ascending to heaven) episode is not just about the death of Draupadi and Yudhisthira’s brothers, and his ascent to heaven without experiencing death. Death is connected here with sin; sin is the cause of death. During the long, lonely and difficult climb of the Himalayan mountains in the punishing cold of the winter, Yudhisthira’s explanations of the fall of each of his brothers and Draupadi were, as it were, pronouncements of Dharma himself. Each one was judged and the judgement pronounced. Subhadra was not there, thus no judgement was pronounced about her. Neither was any, anywhere else in Saaralaa Mahaabhaaarata. No one would pass a judgement on her; she was Krishna’s sister more than a Pandava’s wife.
Suhani was married to Yudhisthira. Like the other wives of Arjuna or the wives of the brothers of Duryodhana, she would have hardly found place in a discussion of the Kuru women, but for certain exceptionalities of her marriage. Incidentally, the Pandava women generally were manipulative, assertive, argumentative, and sometimes noisy too. She was the exact opposite.

Yudhisthira had handed over the kingdom to Pariksha, taken leave of his subjects, and with his brothers and Draupadi had embarked on a long pilgrimage as part of their vaanaprastha. They came to the Biraja kshetra near the river Baitarani. Many local people visited them during their stay there. One day, Hari Sahu, a trader, came to pay his respects to them, and with him was his grown up daughter named Suhani. Yudhisthira asked him why he had not yet got his daughter married. It was not proper, he told him.

Hari Sahu’s response was as unexpected as it was strange. He prayed to him to marry his daughter. His daughter was destined to die during the marriage ceremony itself, which was why he had not got her married, he told the eldest Pandava. He told him that he would live with his daughter’s death if he got him as his son-in-law. He and everyone in his entire caste would be redeemed on account this relationship, he added.

The wise Pandava told him that he was old, was on his pilgrimage and would soon embark on his last journey in the Himalayas, and that under those circumstances it would be entirely wrong for him to marry his daughter. Sahu would not give up, and then his brothers told Yudhisthira that it would be unethical to turn down a wedding proposal. Yudhisthira finally gave in. The family priest of the Pandavas, Dhaumya, came to conduct the marriage rituals. The sage Vyasa also came with his disciples.

Yudhisthira was worried about the fate of his bride but how could the narrator allow her to die and reduce the wedding to a damp squib? Arjuna assured his brother that there was no cause for worry. When the messengers of the god of death, and later Yama himself came to the wedding to take the life of the bride, Arjuna tied them up and dispatched them to the distant mountains. The wedding over, when the truth was out, Hari Sahu requested him to release the god, and Arjuna happily obliged. Yudhisthira interrupted the pilgrimage and the
Pandavas stayed there for thirty-five years – thirty five years of Kali yuga! Thus after Subhadra, Suhani was the wife of a Pandava to share the same space with Draupadi. When they resumed their pilgrimage southward, Yudhisthira asked Suhani to worship Shiva at Kapilas. He told her that on his way back, as they would proceed northward to Varanasi, he would take her with him. He never did. He never returned. When he went to the swarga loka, he saw her there with everyone else of his family.

In this entire episode, Suhani does not utter a single word - literally; neither did she take any decision on her own. She had no choice: she married Yudhisthira because her father wanted it that way, she did not join her husband in his pilgrimage because her husband did not want her to and she did not stay at home but lived in the hills of Kapilas and worshipped Shiva there because that was what her husband wanted her to do. Sarala has created a silent character for which there is no parallel in the puranic literature at least.

The poet does not make an effort to delve into her mind. One does not know how she took it all. For instance, was she happy to have married, and that too, Yudhisthira, whom she could never have even dreamt of marrying? How did she enjoy her status as the inimitable eldest Pandava’s wife? Was she overwhelmed by all that experience? Or did she feel disappointed that her father married her to an old man? Her marriage was the classic case of the proverbial kuaanri kanyaaku budhhaa bara (old bridegroom for the very young bride) - Yudhisthira described himself as an old man, who did not have much time to live (Swargaarohana Parva, 14: 154). How did she feel that her husband, despite his word to take her with him on his way to Varanasi, did not keep his word? Did she feel let down, abandoned, cheated? After a futile waiting for her husband, someday she must have realized that she was destined to live a lonely life in the solitary hills of Kapilas. What were her thoughts then? Or was it the case that her worship of Shiva had freed her from the bonds and the pains of worldly life by then?

Bhanumati and Draupadi shared one thing: they both suffered humiliation in public on account of their husbands. Yudhisthira lost Draupadi in that fateful game of dice, and
Duryodhana ordered his brother to disrobe her. He tried and would not stop even when he saw the miracle happening. Bhishma warned that one glance of Draupadi at the palace would set it on fire. At that precise moment Draupadi cast an angry glance at the women’s quarters in the palace and it was on fire. It was only then that Dussasana stopped.

There was wild commotion in the palace and the wives of the Kaurava princes were running out of it in horror, with their clothes in disarray. Bhanumati, Duryodhana’s wife, ran into the court in panic, virtually naked. She prayed to her sister-in-law for forgiveness. She pacified her, and the fire subsided. Duryodhana wanted the court to see Draupadi naked, and succeeded in showing them his wife naked. Draupadi did not forget her humiliation and sought revenge. The narrative does not say anything about whether Bhanumati forgot her humiliation, which was in a way much worse. As for revenge, whose misfortune could she have wished for? It was Draupadi who was directly responsible for her misery. If she had to teach someone a lesson, she should have cast that angry glance at her brother-in-law, who was trying to disrobe her. But Bhanumati did not blame her. She was too virtuous for that.

Being the king’s wife she was powerful, but only theoretically. Her husband did not seek her views on matters of the kingdom, but that did not prevent her from offering her suggestions to him. It was her duty. He was considerate towards her and listened to her but did not accept her views. Unlike Draupadi, she could not influence her husband’s decisions. Often Draupadi managed to influence her husbands through Krishna, but Bhanumati had none to turn to who could influence her husband’s decisions. She knew that Duryodhana conferred with Karna, Aswasthama, Krupacharya, and Sakuni, but in the end, went by Sakuni’s advice alone. There was no way she could seek Sakuni’s help, she knew, as did her mother-in-law, Gandhari, that Sakuni was working for the destruction of the Kauravas. She said this to her husband in so many words, but he would not just listen to anything against Sakuni. Helplessly she had to watch the enactment of the drama of destruction of her husband.

She did not want war with the Pandavas. She knew that they were under Krishna’s protection and were consequently invincible, and that war with them would only destroy the Kauravas. She knew that Krishna was Narayana himself, and that surrendering to him would bring supreme bliss – to them, to the Pandavas, to everyone. Besides, very importantly, she
was completely without ill will against the Pandavas or Draupadi. She never thought of them as outsiders to the family, exactly as Yudhisthira always thought of the Kauravas as part of the family. Wealth must always be shared, and not doing so would bring only misery, she once emphatically told her husband. And sharing with the Pandavas, she told her husband, would be sharing with one’s own.

Great was her loss and she accepted it with quiet dignity. When she got to know that her son Lakshmana Kumara had fallen in the battlefield, she did not blame her husband or anyone else for this terrible loss nor did she seek revenge. Unlike Draupadi. One might argue that a confirmed loser did not have the privilege of demanding revenge. And then who could she have asked? She knew that her husband was alone then, tired, helpless, afraid and miserable, and was on the run from the battlefield to the safety of the Vyaasa sarovara (Vyasa lake). In any case, she was too spiritually developed to think in terms of revenge. To deny this in favour of such realistic considerations as mentioned above would be cynical and not be in the spirit of Sarala’s narrative.

When a woman is disappointed with her husband, she tends to rely on her son. When the mother senses danger, she tries to secure protection for her child. When Krishna was returning disappointed both from the Kaurava court and from Karna, who he had failed to persuade to join his brothers in the Kurukshetra war, he saw Lakshmana Kumara running from behind to catch up with him. Duryodhana’s son prostrated at his feet. Krishna told him to ask for a boon. He said that he wanted him to survive the war and continue the line. He also said that it was in his mind to give him part of the kingdom after the war. The young man wanted nothing of it all. He prayed for moksha. He said his mother had told him who he was and had taught him what he should ask from him. Bhanumati had taught her son wisely – she had taught him about the ultimate goal for a human and the way that led to it.

THE FIFTH ESSAY

There is a popular story about the poet Jayadeva. He could not complete a certain line in his Gitagovinda because he felt that what he wanted to write was demeaning for Krishna and he could not just write those words: dehi pada pallava mudaaram. How could his Krishna ask
his Radha to put her feet on his head? How could he write such a thing? But he could not think of anything better to substitute those words; it was perfect in that context and impeccable from the point of view of poetic expression. He suffered. He left the line incomplete and went for a bath. Krishna came in the guise of the poet and wrote those very words the poet was unable to write. The rest of the story is of no interest for us here. This little story says many things. Or so we think. One of these is that the one who composed the text and the one who wrote it on the leaf were not always the same person. There was such a time. Of course Valmiki was an exception but this was what was believed to be the case with regard to the Mahabharata. The poet Vyasa composed the lines and dictated them to god Ganesh who wrote them. This is what was said. As for Sarala, he said that he was merely writing what the goddess Sarala instructed him to write. But Sarala was not the one who just put the words on the leaf. He was Vyasa too. He knew that Mahabharata could not be composed without a blessing, and we should think the same about even the most modest of the presentations of a retelling of this eternal story.

In Brahma’s creation there is nothing so tamasik that it does not accommodate even a bit of the sattvik. In this long narrative of hatred, revenge and violence did Sarala think there was a little place for love at all? How did Sarala conceptualize the end of the war scenario? Did peace prevail or was there just the end of the war? Let us go backwards: from “end-of-war” to “love”. Shaanti Parva is part of Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata. But where was shaanti (peace) is in the narrative? There arrived no dawn of peace in Sarala’s version when the Kurukshetra war ended. It was quite different in the Ramayana. There the transfer of power was ungrudging, and in some versions of the narrative it even had the consent of the fallen rulers, Vali of Kishkinda, and Ravana of Lanka. In fact, in both Balarama Das’s retelling of the Ramayana story in Odia and Kamban’s in Tamil, Vali died a devotee of Rama, who had killed him in a totally unacceptable manner. In short, reconciliation at every level - personal, family and political - was easy and fast. There was no bloodshed in their respective kingdoms after their death; neither was there any manifestation of bitterness and disharmony in the
ruling family. In this regard, there is no suggestion, not even the faintest, to the contrary in any well-known version of the Ramayana narrative. True, in some versions there is the mention of Bali’s son Angada’s wish to avenge his father’s killing and his nagging sense of disquiet that he, a devotee of Rama, would never be able to do it – something he owed to his father in terms of putra dharma (son’s duty), as it was understood in those days. Rama was not unaware of this and a time came when Angada could not keep it a secret from him. It shocked everyone when Angada, almost guiltily, told his mind to him. It angered Hanuman but Rama pacified him. He empathized with Angada and even worked out his revenge. He promised Angada that he would avenge his father’s killing in a subsequent incarnation. Thus Angada as Jara killed Rama in the form of Krishna.

Things are very different in the Mahabharata story. In one part of the battlefield Duryodhana was lying in agony awaiting death. The war drums were quiet. In other parts of the Kurukshetra battlefield, with the arrows having stopped whizzing and the maces and swords clanging no more, it was quiet as well. The long, painful howling of those nameless millions who fell in the battlefield every day for eighteen long days must have become feeble or have stopped by the time Duryodhana’s end came. But this quiet was not the serenity of peace but only the silence of gloom. Seeing Duryodhana dying, Yudhisthira was inconsolable. He did not ever want to see that day, he told him, putting his head caringly on his lap. He chided him too, as an affectionate elder would do to an erring youngster; why did he choose to fight, he asked him. Didn’t he know that the Pandavas could simply not be defeated, he asked. Bhima was invincible, Arjuna had divine arrows, and did he not know that Arjuna was the one who had defeated the great god Shiva himself? And then there was the all-knowing Sahadeva who knew the secrets of each warrior – secrets of his weakness and of his death. And then there was Krishna on the Pandavas’ side. How could he think he would win, he asked him. He then said to all who were present that he would give the kingdom to Duryodhana and return to the forest. Bhima mocked at this – the idea of a lame man on the throne of Hastinapura. Yudhisthira said that he would follow his father’s example. So what if Duryodhana would have to live with a physical handicap, he said. His father, Pandu, had given his kingdom to his blind elder brother and retired to the forest. As Dhritarastra ruled, Pandu protected the kingdom on his brother’s behalf. Krishna put an end to this exchange and told them that they must quickly go and meet their mother Kunti, who might kill herself in despair if she did not hear about Duryodhana’s death. Kunti was mighty
pleased and gave Bhima a special ritual welcome when Krishna told her that it was he who had killed Duryodhana. As for Yudhisthira, his father’s example did not trouble him again.

Soon the Pandava brothers and their women were arguing among themselves about who alone must be given credit for the victory in the war. Every one of them claimed credit. As Bhima, Arjuna and Nakula each drew attention to their exploits in the battlefield, Sahadeva said that without his advice the war simply could not have been won - would they have won had he not told them the secret of Duryodhana’s death? Yudhisthira then joined the argument and said that it was because of him that the war was won as victory comes to only those who live the life of dharma, which he did. Draupadi said that her husbands won because she was exceptionally virtuous: she was a maha sati. Subhadra said that because the Kauravas killed her son Abhimanyu, her brother Krishna ensured their destruction. Kunti said she had undergone great suffering in life, and she had all along prayed to god Dharma to give her justice; the annihilation of the Kauravas was a result of her prayers. Soon they were shouting at one another and were fighting (Gadaa Parva, 102: 209-211). Talk of reconciliation with the other! It was these arrogant, conceited victors who needed it most. For them, including the virtuous Yudhisthira, eighteen days of unprecedented bloodshed, death, cruelty and destruction seemed to have gone in vain.

Krishna took them to the severed but living head of Bhima’s son, Belalasena, who had witnessed the war from the top of the pole where he was placed. He told them that all he had seen was a cakra, shining brighter than tens of millions of suns, mowing down fighters as it moved from the Pandavas’ side to the Kauravas and back from the Kauravas’ side to the Pandavas. The Pandavas have no reason for fighting among themselves, said the head, who could see through illusion and see the true nature of things.Terribly upset and angry that his son did not stand up for him, leave alone the family, Bhima hit the head hard, and it fell on the ground dead. The war over, the head would have died anyway; at its request it had been kept alive by Krishna so that it could see the war. The narrative did not need him anymore; the head had served its purpose by declaring the real nature of things. From one point of view, Bhima’s act was a desperate effort of ignorance to protect itself from light. From another, what Bhima did to the head was murder. A proud victor, he rejected the truth of his own insignificance. It was the first murder after the killing of Duryodhana. So what if it was only a severed head. It was a living head!
There were more murders to follow. Ashwasthama had left the battlefield after the death of his father, guru Drona. He heard from a hunter that Duryodhana was awaiting death. He rushed to meet him. He pressured him to make him the commander-in-chief of the Kaurava army, which now comprised three individuals including Aswasthama, and Duryodhana, who had still not reconciled to the Pandavas’ ruling Hastinapura, consented. In the thick darkness of the night he entered the enemy’s camp, killed Dhristadyumna, his father’s killer and the supreme commander of the Pandava army, and then beheaded the five children of Draupadi in their sleep, mistaking them to be the Pandavas. When he saw those heads, Duryodhana was miserable. He regretted having made Ashwasthama his commander-in-chief, reproached him with the harshest of words and dismissed him from his presence. With this killing, there remained only the child in the womb of Uttara, Abhimanyu’s wife, to continue the line of the Kurus.

Even he arrived in the world dead. Ashwasthama’s divine arrow, kaainshikaa, had killed him in his mother’s womb. Enraged that Krishna had cheated him of his weapons, he pulled out a wild kaainshikaa grass, made a bow and an arrow out of it, empowered the arrow with the powerful brahma mantra and shot it at Dwaraka, directing it to kill the Pandavas, who were staying there at that time, Krishna and his entire family. When Krishna’s attempts to neutralize this arrow failed, the creator god Brahma intervened and directed the arrow to destroy the unborn in Uttara’s womb and spare everyone else. This resulted in yet another gruesome murder. Responding to everyone’s prayer and appeal, including his mother Devaki’s, Krishna restored life to the infant. The relief and the happiness that Pariksha’s (known as Parikshit in the canonical version) restoration to life brought to the family was somewhat neutralized by the sorrow for the loss of the young Uttara. Incidentally, no one had prayed for Uttara’s life. She had delivered the successor to the throne; neither the family nor the narrative needed her anymore.

The background of Krishna’s stealing of Ashwasthama’s weapons is this: when Draupadi came to know that Ashwasthama had killed her sons, she wanted Krishna to kill him. Krishna did not kill him (he did not tell anyone, neither did anyone ask him, why he didn’t) but dispossessed him of his weapons and disempowered him thereby. He gave those weapons to Draupadi, and she was pacified. Incidentally, in Sarala’s narrative, Draupadi did not ask her
husbands to kill Ashwasthama and there was no fight between the Pandavas and Ashwasthama (the fight was between him and Krishna, as mentioned above), and Awasthama was neither disfigured nor cursed. In fact, during the last phase of their vaanaprastha, the Pandavas met Ashwasthama, along with Kripacharya, who was the priest of the Kuru clan and had fought in the Kurukshestra war on behalf of the Kauravas, at the holy Prag (Prayag), where the sacred rivers Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati meet. Their meeting was pleasant. For both the Pandavas and Awasthama this was the final reconciliation. Only a cynic might ask whether it meant anything at that stage of their life. The poet writes about this meeting in the most sublime language. To the inmates of the ashram as they gathered round them, Awasthama recounted the greatness and the glory of the Pandavas. For both the Pandavas and him, hatred and rancour had become a thing of the past. There is nothing about Draupadi here; we do not know whether the mother had reconciled to the killing of her sleeping sons. In the story of that last phase of the life of the Pandavas, dedicated to religious activities, acts of penance and reconciliation, Draupadi hardly figured.

It was not the loss of the kingdom, but the loss of all their sons – they did not know that one of their sons, Durdasa, was still alive - had filled both Dhritarashtra and Gandhari with intense hatred for the Pandavas, and each wanted to take revenge. However, it seems that neither knew that there was revenge in the other’s mind. Gandhari’s target was Yudhisthira, and Dhritarashtra’s was Bhima. Gandhari ended up destroying, instead of the eldest Pandava, her only surviving son, Durdasa, and subsequently Dhritarashtra smashed to pieces only an iron replica of Bhima. With the mother killing her son ended the first move of the victor Yudhisthira for reconciliation with the vanquished. Soon after, when Gandhari went to the battlefield and saw the dead bodies of her dearest ones, she was in great distress. She cursed Krishna. She was convinced that he could have stopped the war and that he deliberately did not because he wanted the Kauravas destroyed. She cursed him that his entire family would suffer destruction in thirty six years as comprehensively as had hers. Her grief and despair had made her bloodthirsty, not turned her against bloodshed. She wanted revenge and laid the foundation for yet another terrible family-internal war in the distant Dwaraka. One redeeming thing about this fratricidal war was that it did not drive a wedge between Balarama and Krishna.
Killings related to the Mahabharata war ended with Yudhishthira’s becoming the king of Hastinapura, but killings are but one manifestation of the hatred, revengefulness, jealousy, and intense ill will which lie at the root of every war. Bhima hated Dhritarashtra and Gandhari who were living with them. In order to torture the helpless old man mentally, he would go out of his way to boast in his presence that he had single-handedly destroyed the Kaurava brothers, and would even stoop to describe how mercilessly he had butchered every one of them. He did not hesitate to speak ill of even Bhishma and Drona, who for him were just defeated enemies, inviting Yudhisthira’s censor. He would remind him of their goodwill and affection for them and of the good things they had done for them on numerous occasions. This had no effect on Bhima. He was his crudest, meanest and cruellest worst when he stubbornly refused money to Dhritarashtra who had asked for it to perform the rites for his children, relatives etc. Yudhisthira and Arjuna disapproved of his attitude but could do nothing. So they gave part of their own personal possessions to him. Bhima went to the extent of saying that it was in his interest to ensure that the souls of the Kaurava brothers remained amokshya (un-liberated) and Duryodhana’s soul rotted in hell, which would happen if they did not receive proper death ritual. It is difficult to imagine a more horrible, more depressing and more disgusting expression of hatred. Such words as these are as murderous as murder.

Bhima did not hesitate to insult Dhritarashtra, even when he had renounced the life of the householder and was about to go to the forest. By way of taking leave, he was advising Yudhisthira, as would a genuine well-wisher, about what he should do as the king. Bhima got angry and charged him of suggesting that Yudhisthira’s rule was flawed because of which he was giving him advice and taunted the poor old man saying that instead of giving such advice to Yudhisthira who did not need it, he should have given it to his own son, who did. What kind of a person was he, Bhima asked him, who was sick for those who were his own, and a healer for those who were not? Besides, why was he holding forth on the duties of a king, when he had no business to do so, as one on his way to vaanaprastha? Comparing him with the proverbial old swan, he told him that he had put on the garb of a saint after having consumed his own family and relatives. Bhima’s conduct shows that hatred does not disappear when the killings stop, and that once started, a war does not easily come to an end. The language of the end-of-war is as harsh, loud and shrill as is the language of the war.
Despite every effort of Yudhisthira, there was thus no harmony in the family. He begged Dhritarashtra and Gandhari not to leave him and go for vaanaprastha. He had done everything he could to make them feel comfortable. But despite all this respect, concern and care, they were unhappy, oppressed by the memories of the bygone times and tormented by the loss of their hundred sons. However, they were pleased with Yudhisthira. In spite of all the humiliation and the hurt they received from Bhima, the old couple could not bring themselves to turn down Yudhisthira’s pleas not to leave him and they continued to stay in the palace. One day the sage Vyasa visited them and advised the unhappy Dhritarashtra and Gandhari to retire to the forest. This time they turned down all appeals of Yudhisthira. But they did not go alone; with them went Sanjaya, and Vidura, both well wishers of the Pandavas and to the latter’s surprise, their mother, Kunti. She told Gandhari that said she had not been able to live with the fact that her eldest son was dead, killed by a son of hers: paapistha (sinful) Arjuna. That word does not condemn Arjuna as much as it brings out her gnawing agony on the loss of her unfortunate eldest born. Sarala’s narrative does not provide another instance of Kunti speaking of Karna with so much affection in such precision of expression and another instance of so deep a sense of disappointment and defeat by the mother of the victors. By rejecting to enjoy the privileges of the queen mother and choosing to join her sad brother-in-law and sister-in-law for a life in the forest, she, in all likelihood, was making a statement.

In Sarala’s Mahaabharata, as in other known narrators’ retelling of this great story, there is no rejection of war. War did have a place in the scheme of things in the world of Mahabharata; it was indeed the way of settling disputes which could not be done through peaceful means such as arbitration, negotiation, and renouncement of its claims by one party and the like. This apart, performing raajasuia yajna and aswamedha yajna was considered to be a worthy act of the greatest among the kings. These yajnas brought material prosperity in terms of power, prestige and wealth and were also believed to bring religious merit to the jajamaan, the performer. In Sarala’s narrative, Yudhisthira performed these both, and Balarama, only the latter. This Balarama did as atonement for having killed both humans and
demons on several occasions. Those he had killed might have been unrighteous, vicious and wicked or might have been his enemies, and he might have killed some in self-defence too. He was an avatara himself (although he might have been unaware of it unlike his brother Krishna), and the cosmic purpose of his incarnation was to rid the world of the sinful. However at the human level, these considerations and justifications were considered inadequate for killing. Therefore ritual atonement in the form of performing an appropriate yajna, namely aswamedha yajna, was deemed necessary. After he became the king of Hastinapura, Yudhisthira performed the aswamedha jajna for the same reason. On the advice of the sages including Narada, he had earlier performed the raajasuiya jajna in order to facilitate the upward journey of his father in the other world. Both these, especially the latter, involved the karta’s obtaining subservience of other rulers. It did not really amount to the subservient king’s loss of independence or his kingdom becoming part of an empire; it amounted to much less. For instance, when Yudhisthira performed raajasuiya yajna, the kings whose subservience he had obtained had to be present at the yajna with their gifts. Nothing more seemed to have been expected of them. But in many cases the rulers’ subservience had to be obtained through force. In sum, war was a legitimate institution in the Mahabharata world. The great war of Kurukshetra was fought to settle a succession dispute. It is another thing that there were people like Sakuni who clandestinely sought revenge through a conclusive war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas.

War was and had to be only the very last resort since it involved the killing of innocent fighters in large numbers. There was no war in the familiar sense of the term that excluded all those who were not directly connected with the cause of it. Those who were morally sensitive were keenly aware of it. They knew that war needed strong justification; therefore all efforts had to be made to avoid it. Thus in any well known retelling of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the narrative of war contains the narrative of the efforts made for the avoidance of it. If ultimately a war had to be fought, then it had to be governed by some moral code. This part of the war narrative in Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata projects the humanitarian angle and somewhat dramatizes the treatment of the theme.

Now it was the Pandavas who were challenging Duryodhana; they were fully aware that it was they who were going to wage a war. Yudhisthira did not want war between brothers. When the time came to decide on war, he told Krishna, who he was sending to Duryodhana
as his emissary, that he would not go to war if Duryodhana gave him just one village. He had seen his brothers suffer privations for years in the forest. This had pained him greatly. He did not want them to undergo such deprivation again. He was no longer able to reject the option of war altogether. All he thought he could do in order to ward it off was to ask so little, so incredibly little, from Duryodhana that he was certain he would not grudge granting him that. That was the absolute limit he had set for himself. When Sakuni suggested to him (probably seriously or probably somewhat mockingly and cynically, a matter that Sarala leaves unclear (Udjoga Parva, 232: 153-157)) that as a wise and virtuous person, he should abandon the war option, leave the kingdom to Duryodhana, return to the forest and visit places of pilgrimage, with uncharacteristic bitterness and harshness, Yudhisthira told him that he should ensure that for a change Duryodhana should leave the kingdom to him and go on a pilgrimage.

Surprisingly, Bhima appeared disinclined towards war when Krishna sought his opinion about it on the eve of going to the Kaurava court. Probably on moral grounds - again a matter that is left unclear in Sarala’s story. However as they were talking, he got agitated when he recalled the suffering and the humiliation they all had gone through because of the hostile Kauravas. Then he told Krishna that he wanted war. There is no knowing whether Krishna got the impression that Bhima was really not very enthusiastic about war or whether he was working on the minds of those Pandava women (that was precisely what he told both Draupadi and Kunti), when he met them to know their views. It was true that in the beginning Bhima told Krishna that one village for all the five of them would not be sufficient, since Yudhisthira had the habit of feeding a large number of brahmins and others every day. Because of such doings of his elder brother he was worried that he would go hungry day after day. So he appealed to Krishna to ask Duryodhana for one village for him alone. He even told him that Duryodhana would not turn down his request because he had obliged him in the past on quite a few occasions. Arjuna did not want war. For him war between brothers was unethical, adharma. He told Krishna that he would be happy with just one village and that he was certain that Duryodhana would not refuse him, remembering the good he had done him in the past. All he requested Krishna to do was manage to get a good village for him. Nakula wanted two villages, one for himself and one for his brother Sahadeva. They were motherless, he told Krishna, because of which he felt insecure. He was uncertain how their stepbrothers – the sons of Kunti – would treat them after the war was won. That was why he needed two villages for themselves. Now what Sahadeva told Krishna was entirely different
from what his brothers had told him. Whatever he, the avatara, wanted to happen, whether war or peace, would happen, he told him; however, if he wanted him to give his views, then he would only say that if the avatara wanted to fulfill his avataric purpose, then he must ask Duryodhana for what he simply would not and even could not give: five villages, namely, Indraprastha, Yamaprastha, Baarunaa, Hastinaa and Jayanta (Udyoga Parva, 89: 145). In the Pandava family there were only two – Krishna did not seek Subhadra’s views - who unequivocally demanded war: Kunti and Draupadi. They wanted revenge. They were not troubled by any of the disturbing issues war raised; as though for them at that point of time they did not even exist. When Krishna told Kunti that not merely Yudhisthira, but Bhima and Arjuna too were rather disinclined to fight, she was furious. She condemned her children; she said that she had given birth to jackals, not lions (Udyoga Parva, 109: 98).

Yudhisthira and Arjuna carried their reluctance to fight to the battlefield itself. Arjuna was unwilling to start the war. He would fight only if he was attacked, he told Krishna. When Krishna complained to the eldest Pandava that his brother was unwilling to fight, Bhima sought his permission to start the war, which Krishna readily gave. But Yudhisthira restrained him. Arjuna was right, he told Krishna. He said he would make one last effort to avoid war. The armies were already facing each other, ready to fight, and were waiting for the first arrow to be shot, as it were. But for Yudhisthira no time was too late to explore the possibility of avoiding war. He walked alone, weaponless, to the Kauravas’ side. He sought and received blessings from venerable elders such as Bhishma, Drona, Bhurishrava, Karna, etc., for success in the war, and then he went to Dhritarashtra and Duryodhana and pleaded with them for peace. It was just one village he was asking for, he told them, but Duryodhana flatly refused even that. Dhritarashtra remained silent. Yudhisthira realized that war could not be averted. He had come to accept the fact that he would have to perform the adharmik act of fighting a fratricidal war.

As for the Kauravas, they too had made attempts to avoid war. They had sent their emissaries to the Pandavas. Their condition was that the Pandavas must give up their entirely unreasonable demand for a part of the kingdom of Hastinapura. Duryodhana was convinced that they had no claims to the throne. Thus from his point of view, the Pandavas were the aggressors, and a war was being thrust on Hastinapura. During Krishna’s visit to the Kaurava court as Yudhisthira’s emissary, Bhishma, Drona and Dhritarastra strongly advised
him not to let him go empty-handed, and Duryodhana, in deference to their wish, was inclined to give two villages to the Pandavas. The venerable elders had clearly warned him of the consequences of displeasing Krishna. He himself had apprehensions on his account too; he knew that one could not survive if one displeased Hari (i.e., Krishna): *drijodhana boilaa hari niraasha hoigale / brati paaribaatiki baasudebara kopa kale* (Duryodhana said, if Hari is disappointed / Can we survive if Basudeba (Hari or Krishna) gets angry?) (*Udjoga Parva*, 165: 118). Incidentally, despite Krishna’s support to the Pandavas, Duryodhana was never really antagonistic towards him; his enmity towards the Pandavas never extended to him. On just one occasion he had acted in a hostile manner. He had asked Dussasana to kill him in the Kaurava court itself. But he was extremely angry at that time. Krishna had just named the five villages he wanted for the Pandavas, and Sakuni had exposed the unfairness of Krishna’s demand. He had told the court how these villages could never be given. Duryodhana had felt cheated. In that state of extreme provocation he had ordered Krishna’s killing. It would not be unreasonable to treat this single hostile action of his towards Krishna as an aberration. Incidentally, soon both Krishna and Duryodhana calmed down, and Duryodhana gave him his final message for the Pandavas: he would give them nothing; if the Pandavas wanted territory, then they would have to take it by force.

Bhishma, Bhurishrava, Drona and Karna, among others, were aware that Duryodhana was not going to win the war. In fact, except for Duryodhana and his brothers, none from the Kaurava side believed that the Pandavas, with Krishna on their side, would lose. The Kaurava elders did not want war, not because they were afraid of death, but because they did not want one of the Kuru lines, namely Dhritarashtra’s, to end.

If Bhishma, Bhurishrava, etc. had decided to fight for Duryodhana, they had a good reason. Despite their affection and enormous good will for the Pandavas, they looked upon them as aggressors in the specific context of the war. They would have liked to see Yudhisthira, not Duryodhana, as the king of Hastinapura, but that did not happen. In their view destiny had chosen Duryodhana. They all had no doubt that the Pandavas had perished in the lac palace fire. Only Vidura, Sakuni, Sanjaya and Krishna knew the truth. But neither Vidura nor Sanjaya told that truth to Dhritarashtra or any Kuru elder like Bhishma or Bhurishrava, when king Dhritarashtra was seeking the elders’ opinion about crowning Duryodhana as his successor. They were promise-bound by Krishna not to tell that truth to anyone. Duryodhana
was not made the king of Hastinapura in a clandestine manner. There was nothing illegitimate about his kingship.

Bhishma’s and others’ advising Duryodhana to give two villages (it is not certain that they would have thought differently from Sakuni had they known the names of the villages that Krishna wanted for the Pandavas. Not that Sakuni did. He said he knew Krishna. As such he knew he would make impossible demands.) to the Pandavas was one thing, and considering their attack on Hastinapura legitimate, in the event of Duryodhana’s refusal to give any territory whatsoever to them, was quite another. Besides they had given that advice to Duryodhana solely for reasons of Krishna. Their advice was not based on any consideration of the merits of the demand of the Pandavas. That issue was not discussed at all; neither was the Pandavas’ request for part of the kingdom viewed as obviously legitimate, needing no discussion. The considerations of the venerable elders were Krishna-centred. They simply did not want to disrespect Krishna. They did not want him to return disappointed, as Dhritarashtra put it: niraasha hoi ethun na jaa-antu naaraayana (Let not Narayana go from this place disappointed) (Udjoga Parva, 161: 74). Duryodhana’s wife, Bhanumati, was the only one who wanted her husband to share his kingdom with the Pandavas, independent of the Krishna factor. Her point was that it was always good to share with others one’s fortune, which had been the result of collective effort, suggesting that the prosperity of a kingdom was always due to the contributions of many, not just of the one who happened to be the king at a given point of time.

A very important part of the discourse on war in Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata is the working out of an ethical code for fighting. Before the war began, the Kauravas and the Pandavas met in Krishna’s presence to decide on the rules of the war. Narayana himself was the witness. Said Duryodhana, “yehaa heuachi dharma mahaabhaarata samara … yetha kain saakshi hoithibe prabhu deba naaraayana (This is the righteous Mahabharata war… / The witness here is Narayana himself) (Udjoga Parva, 396: 65-66).” Thus in Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata, it is interestingly unclear whether the Kurukshetra war was “dharma yuddha” because of the cause or because of the presence of Krishna in the battlefield. In one reading, the cause is irrelevant or at least of secondary importance: in this, the second part of the quote, mentioning Krishna’s presence in the battlefield, provides the reason for the first part of it which declares it to be a righteous war. In the other reading, which assigns primacy or at least
relative importance to the cause, the idea of first part is independent of the meaning of the second; the second only reinforces the idea of the first part at most. As for the rules of the war, this was probably the only war in the entire puranic literature, the rules of which were formulated in advance in explicit terms by the adversaries sitting together. The rules they made were additions to the ancient, existing ones. The rule that one must not hit below the waist in a fight with the mace was not a rule they made; it was an ancient rule, as was the one that the most destructive divine weapons must not be used as a matter of routine. The initiative for mutually agreed upon rules came from the Kaurava side. Duryodhana suggested that additional rules were necessary - it was brothers who were going to fight, and it must be ensured that fighting did not descend to barbarism. However the real motive for this laudable initiative was not quite honest. On the eve of the war, many of the great kings and warriors who had joined the Kauravas told Duryodhana that there was no possibility of his victory at all; the Pandavas were unbeatable warriors and then there was with them Krishna who was protecting them. Bhishma concurred. Arjuna, he said, was an exceptional warrior, who, at various points of time, had defeated the entire Kaurava army, god Shiva, Balarama, and then Krishna himself. He had divine weapons. Bhishma, Drona, Ashwasthama, and Karna had them too but Arjuna had the most devastating ones. He had an arrow called manavedi (literally, that which could pierce through the mind). No one had a neutralizing weapon for it. Arjuna simply could not be defeated. The only way he could be restrained, Bhishma told Duryodhana, was to have the Pandavas agree to abide by rules that would in effect constrain Arjuna: no one must use divine weapons, Arjuna must not use his special weapon called manavedi and only those weapons must be used which one had learnt from one’s preceptor, which meant that Arjuna would not employ what he had obtained from the great god Shiva, for example. Duryodhana proposed these constraints, and the Pandavas agreed.

As for the narrative of the war, it is not just an abstraction of the happenings in the battlefield: of the clang of the maces and the swish of the arrows, the neighing of the war horses and the roaring of the elephants, the beatings of the drums and the war cries of the armies, the main warriors’ challenges to their counterparts on their enemy’s side, their declaration of their own
prowess, the gory fights, the victory cries of the winners and the groans of the dying, etc. The narrative is also about some of the combatants trading charges and counter charges as they recounted the injustices done to them by the other, the humiliations heaped on them by the other, through which the characters justified their act of revenge and their thirst for their enemy’s blood. Then the narrative is also about the tense exchanges among the onlookers, gods in heaven and fighters in the battlefield itself, as they were watching a single combat, and about their cries of joy or anxiety or grief as the fight was going on. The exchanges between the combatants in the form of challenges, abuses, threats, taunts, etc. externalized their consuming hatred in the form of language. The final fight between Bhima and Duryodhana provides an excellent example of a war narrative in Sarala’s *Mahaabhaarata*. Before the fight started, there was a good deal of exchange between Krishna and Duryodhana about who among the Pandavas must fight the latter. Invoking the requirements of a righteous combat (dharma yuddha) Duryodhana demanded that only one Pandava fight him because he was alone. “You alone fought righteously”, Krishna taunted him and then he went on to recount how the Kaurava had transgressed the norms of a righteous war on many occasions. Krishna tried to demoralize him and make him feel like a supplicant; he told him that the Pandavas were being considerate to him by accepting his demand, but he knew, as did everyone that Duryodhana’s demand was entirely just (*Gadaa Parva*, 69-70: 243-254). When the fight started, Bhima reminded Duryodhana of his many acts of injustice towards the Pandavas and thundered his threats at him. As the fight progressed, Bhima was the one who was getting exhausted and wounded, and Duryodhana was showing no signs of fear or fatigue. The anxious exchanges among the Pandava brothers, Sahadeva’s account of the curse on Duryodhana (that his thigh would be mortally crushed in the battlefield), Yudhisthira’s distress on Bhima’s plight, Narada’s exhortions to Balaram to intervene on Duryodhana’s behalf, and his subsequent warning to Krishna about Balarama’s imminent intervention, among so much else, constitute the outer layer of the war narrative in this episode. This episode shows that the narrative of war is not merely one of hatred and violence, but also of care and concern, cunning and manipulation, empathy, anxiety, apprehension and relief. And this does not exhaust the list.

Consider the episode of the killing of Karna, which deals with not just his final battle with Arjuna and his eventual decapitation but also with the ethics of war. It deals with the conflict between the demands of the code of war and the exigencies of the situation during the
engagement at a specific point of time. The narrative of the Kurukshetra war reaches its climax as it describes the fierce fight between the brothers Karna and Arjuna. The distinction between reality and representation tends to get blurred as the poet describes the fearsome spectacle of how the arrows flew, how the divine arrows neutralized the effect of each other, and how countless soldiers fell, as did the horses and the elephants. And to provide relief, there is the mention of the impending fight between Sakuni and Yudhisthira and of how it was averted, and how Sahadeva, better equipped to fight Sakuni, eventually engaged him. And then there is the description of how the wheels of Karna’s chariot sank into the ground as the curse of the snake Sosaka materialized. The snake was disappointed that it could not take his revenge on Arjuna as Karna refused to use it for the second time against his opponent. That would be against the code of the archer, told him. The frustrated snake cursed him. The narrative then moves on to how he got off the chariot and tried to lift it. He appealed to Arjuna to rest for a while and give him time to lift his chariot; he would have to wait for only two \textit{dandas} (one of the smallest units of time in the ancient Indian system of measurement of time), he told Arjuna. He reminded him of the ethics of war, authored by no less an authority than the creator god Brahma himself, and then went on to list the circumstances in which one was forbidden to kill one’s adversary. War ethics forbade the killing of the weaponless, he told Arjuna; being the great and righteous warrior that he was, he should wait for a while instead of taking advantage of his plight. As the great Pandava stopped fighting, Krishna urged him to kill Karna. Arjuna demurred, saying that it was against war dharma. Besides since it was just a matter of waiting for a short while, it would be better to do so, rather than kill such a great warrior without a fight. Krishna told him that Karna would be invincible once his chariot was lifted from the ground at the expiry of that short period of two \textit{dandas}; therefore that particular situation demanded that he be killed without delay. Then Krishna taunted Karna recounting the various wrong doings of those he was fighting for, including the killing of Abhimanyu, and told him that those who indulged in unrighteous acts against others had no right to demand righteous conduct from their victims. He had spoken of Abhimanyu’s death in order to provoke him to kill Karna. The provocation worked. Setting aside war dharma, an enraged Arjuna asked Karna to fight him from the ground. It was an unequal fight with one of the combatants fighting from a chariot and the other standing on the ground. Arjuna’s arrow cut off Karna’s head, but at this point the poet introduces an element of drama into the narrative by echoing the beheading of Ravana: another head arose in its place. Sahadeva was consulted and he informed Krishna and Arjuna
about not only how Karna could be killed but also how Karna had that particular life-saving gift in the first place. When arrows stopped whizzing, words took their place. After Karna was killed, his father, the sun god, and then his friend Duryodhana wept for him, each recalling his courage, bravery, greatness as a warrior, generosity, honesty, commitment to truth, among others. The narrative of the killing of Karna is not just about the details of a terrible fight in the battlefield; it is also about human values, an individual’s dilemma, manipulative talk and abandonment of dharma for the sake of victory. In a sense, the discourse is entirely realistic since a war is not fought merely with weapons in the battlefield; it is fought in the mind too, and its impact is by no means restricted to the battlefield and more often than not, there are long term effects. These question the relevant aspects of the value system itself; true, Parshurama weeded out the degenerate kshatriyas in his prolonged attacks on them over a period of time, but did his action not create political instability in all those kingdoms he had visited with his dreaded weapon *parsu*, and a serious social and human problem too in the form of young, unprotected widows?

The episode on Sakuni’s end in the battlefield is remarkable in the context of the present discussion. The narration covers parts of two consecutive Parvas of *Saaralaa Mahaabhaarataa*; it begins at the end of *Karna Parva* and spills over to the beginning of *Salya Parva*. Karna had fallen, and Salya had assumed commandership of the Kaurava army. All the mighty warriors such as Bhishma, Drona, Jayadratha, Bhurishrava, Dussasana, and all of Duryodhana’s brothers fighting on his side had by now perished in the war. That was when Sakuni met Sahadeva in the battlefield. The narrative of their fight is qualitatively different from that between Arjuna and Karna or Bhima and Duryodhana, for example. It is only minimally about the shooting of the arrows and the clanging of the spears, the falling of the cavalry and the destruction of the horses. It is primarily about practical sense, values, beliefs, repentance, accepting moral responsibility and sense of duty. When they faced each other Sahadeva asked Sakuni why he was still fighting, when his purpose had been virtually served: all the Kauravas except Duryodhana had been killed and the eldest Kaurava’s killing was only a matter of time. Sahadeva knew that Sakuni had to avenge the brutal killing of his family and by having the Kauravas so comprehensively wiped out he had already obtained his revenge. Sahadeva suggested that instead of fighting a war that was no longer his, he should return to his kingdom and rule there happily.
In a tone of unmistakable remorse Sakuni told him how in the process of taking justified revenge, he had caused so much destruction. He had committed grievous sins, being responsible for every act of cruelty and injustice meted out to the Pandavas by the Kauravas, including the merciless killing of Abhimanyu, and the death of countless warriors too. In another version of Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata Sakuni said that he was spiritually degraded, as he was responsible for the death of his own nephews, despite what they had done to his family. Having caused innumerable deaths, he now would have to sacrifice himself in the battlefield, which he said was the only option he had in order to atone for the sins he had committed. He said that he was blessed in that he had the opportunity of dying, fighting in the Kurukshetra battlefield, where Bhagawan Narayana himself was manifest in Arjuna’s chariot as his charioteer. Dying such a death he would ascend to the abode of Narayana. His was not the language of deceit or hatred, with which the narrative of war is made. His was the language of remorse – of an anguished sufferer who was burdened with an overpowering sense of sin and was trying to atone for his crucial role in the massive destruction that the war had caused. In Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata no one was filled with such remorse at the death of the ordinary soldiers in the war, and Sakuni’s emphatic condemnation of himself on this account provides a distinct moral dimension to that episode.

The story of the second meeting of Sakuni and Sahadeva in the battlefield is brief. As Sakuni challenged Sahadeva, the latter again asked him to disengage from the battle: pare upagaara kari aapane puna nasu / sugnaani purusa tuho saangaame kinke pasu (Having benefited the other, you wish to destroy yourself / Being a wise person, why are you participating in the war?) (Salya Parva, 6: 58). This time Sakuni did not respond to it – he had nothing to add to what he had already said. He had come determined to sacrifice himself. He simply challenged Sahadeva and got killed. The description of the fight is brief and dull, as it always is in the narrative when two uncelebrated warriors are involved. The unresponsiveness to both himself and things around that comes over to a person marching to his death is appropriately captured by the listlessness of the narrative that deals with the end of this unfortunate character – a discerning person constrained by circumstances to cause a conflagration. That was one Sakuni. As for the other, he was by no means “unfortunate” – in fact, he was the very opposite of it. He was the one who had always seen himself as an associate of the Supreme One in the fulfillment of his avatariic objective. But this Sakuni had become mute in this last episode about him.
If the story of a war is the story of the externalization of the hatred and violence within, the language of Yudhisthira, Draupadi and Kunti provide very illuminating examples in this respect. Defeated and humiliated by Karna in the battlefield, Yudhisthira returned hastily to his quarters, where he was fuming. Krishna and Arjuna went to give him solace and bring him back to the battlefield. Beside himself with anguish and frustration, the son of Dharma blasted Arjuna for not having killed Karna already: "aare aare arjuna tohara jibana dhika heu" (you, Arjuna, may your life be wretched) (Karna Parva: 62: 81). He mocked him for all his tall talk about his prowess in archery. He condemned his god-given weapons, his conch Devadatta, his bow gaandiva, his divine chariot, Nandighosha, the divine arrow paashupata and the quiver akshyaya tunira that always remained full, given to him by Bhagavan Shiva and his consort goddess Parvati respectively. He asked him how he was alive, when his elder brother had undergone so much disgrace. Not content with reprimanding Arjuna in the harshest of language, he turned to his friend and charioteer and condemned him: "dhika dhika tohara sakhaa je saarathi cakrapaani / re krushna maansa tora khaau re grudhani" (damned be your friend and charioteer, who wields the discuss / you, Krishna, may the female vulture eat your flesh!) (Karna Parva, 62: 85).

These words were very harsh, to say the least. Through these Sarala tells us how badly defeat and humiliation had affected the poise and the composure of the man celebrated as the embodiment of virtue on earth. They tell us about how very ordinary Yudhisthira was. Karna had humbled him and tortured him in the battlefield and instead of killing him, had let him off in the name of Kunti. All these had understandably hurt this kshatriya’s self-respect and pride. But he was not the only Pandava to have this experience in the battlefield while fighting Karna. Except Arjuna all his brothers had had the same experience, and even he had once been left off. But none had responded the way the eldest Pandava did. He was absolutely no match for Karna; therefore there was no ignominy in losing to him. There was no good reason for him to take his defeat so deeply to heart. Then it was no disgrace to take the name of one’s mother at the time of one’s death. Following the code, Karna had asked
him to take the name of his *ista* (the most desired one) at the time of his death, a privilege and an opportunity no one else among the celebrated warriors in that war had. Karna himself did not. Apart from these, it did not even occur to Yudhishthira – the wise man that he was - how terrible it must have been for Karna to set him free when he was fighting at that time as the commander-in-chief of the Kaurava army. His charioteer justly questioned his commitment. But there was no need for anyone to say anything about commitment to Karna; that virtuous man was painfully aware that while he was redeeming his word to his mother on the eve of the war that he would spare all her sons except Arjuna, unknown to the Kauravas, he was betraying Duryodhana by that very act.

While attacking Arjuna – and Krishna - with those harsh words, Yudhishthira forgot that Karna was his elder brother, whose blessings for victory he had sought in the Kurukshetra battlefield. He had blessed him. Yudhishthira had invited him to join his own brothers in the war against the Kauravas, and with utmost sincerity had declared that as their eldest he would wear the crown after the war. Karna explained to him why he had to fight for Duryodhana, as he had, to Krishna and his mother earlier, and nothing of this was a secret to Yudhishthira. He also knew what Karna had said, namely that he preferred Yudhishthira to be the king. All these were forgotten in that moment of frustration and wild anger.

Draupadi’s reprimand of Bhima, who had not killed Dussasana even after so many days of the war, was no less venomous than Yudhishthira’s reprimand of Arjuna and Krishna. The difference was that for the most part of her diatribe she used the strategy of indirect speech, in the sense that instead of directly hitting Bhima with her words, she indulged in a discourse of self-pity. She kept saying how very naïve and foolish she had been to depend on her husband for the fulfillment of her oath and how low her status had become on account of her failure to redeem it. And although she was addressing Krishna all along, her reproach was actually more directed at her husbands, in particular, Bhima, than at him –the familiar style of the angry wife who had felt badly let down by her husband. She could not be charged of irreverence to her husband since she was addressing someone else. This is a known advantage of indirect speech. She was not worried about being discourteous to Krishna because she that knew Krishna would understand her perfectly – he would know that those were the words of a woman who had been deeply wounded, had suffered the wound for long years and was now getting impatient for the healing balm in the form of Dussasana’s blood.
She also knew it very well that she was too close to him for him to take umbrage at her occasional misdemeanour.

From her diatribe, it is clear that Draupadi had one single interest in the war, at least at that point in time, namely, the dismemberment of Dussasana. But that was not happening. Fifteen days of fighting had already taken place, and her hair was still loose. She had kept it loose ever since Dussasana had tugged at her hair as he brought her to the Kaurava court. In that court Bhima had taken the terrible oath that he would pour Dussasana’s blood on her hair. Now Bhishma, Drona, Bhurishrava, Jayadratha, and all the Kaurava brothers except Duryodhana and Dussasana had fallen, and Aswasthama had left the battlefield. But none of this comforted her. When she learnt from Krishna about Bhima’s having killed all the Kaurava brothers barring Duryodhana and Dussasana, she rebuked Krishna directly and Bhima indirectly, for gloating over the killing of mere children: *athaanoi bhaai maaile se atanti baaluta / yehanta maari krushna tora yedeka uddhata* (they killed ninety-eight brothers who were kids / For this killing, Krishna, you are so proud and excited!) (Karna Parva, 41: 224).

Ridiculing the Pandavas, she said that they were all no better than mere lads, who had survived by sacrificing Abhimanyu. They had got Ghatotkacha and Ghatuka killed too. Her father, Drupada, had perished, as had the king Virata with his sons, Sweta, Sankha, and Uttara. As for Bhishma, he was their grandfather, and Bhurishhrava, their great grandfather. The celebrated Drona was their preceptor, and Jayadratha was Dussila’s husband and their brother-in-law. And the Pandavas were celebrating the killing of these men! She said that the real culprits were freely moving around and enjoying themselves; only the innocents had lost their lives. Bhima had killed the weaklings and had fled on seeing the strong.

Her harangue was a narration of her suffering on account of Bhima’s failure to protect her honour. She went on recounting all that had happened that day in the Kaurava court when Yudhisthira lost his brothers and her to Duryodhana, how they had all sat in the court as the servants of Duryodhana and what all she had undergone there. She recounted how Bhima had uttered his oath to dismember Dussasana and bathe her with his blood and how foolishly she had trusted those words and how futile it had been to keep her hair loose for long thirteen years and more. Which living man’s wife underwent so much misery, she asked Krishna, and
wondered how her husbands did not feel ashamed to call themselves *kshatriyas* (*Karna Parva*, 42: 236). Bhima begged her not to upbraid him any more and promised her that he would either kill Dussasana the following day or make a fire and immolate himself. This seemed to calm her; at least she stopped her tirade. She repeated his words, as if to remind him of his oath and retired to her quarters.

Just as Draupadi craved for Dussasana’s blood, Kunti thirsted for Duryodhana’s. That day the fight had gone into the night. Innumerable fighters were killed, and in that dark confusion, it was not easy to figure out who had been killed and who had survived. When the Pandavas and Krishna returned for the night’s rest, they found Kunti waiting for them for their ritual welcome. One by one, she asked each Pandava whether he had killed Gandhari’s eldest son. Each said that too many fighters had fallen that day, and because of the confusion in the battlefield, he did not know whether or not Duryodhana was among the dead. She then asked Krishna whether he knew about Duryodhana’s death. Krishna gave her the same answer. Then she went into a long tirade blasting them all, not excluding Krishna. It was no less virulent than Draupadi’s or Yudhisthira’s; it was indeed even more so, considering that she was a mother clamouring for a son’s blood — so what if that son was her sister-in-law Gandhari’s?

Her condemnation was direct, like Yudhisthira’s and unlike Draupadi’s. She was the mother and did not need the protection of indirect speech. She condemned herself that she had given herself to the great gods and had given birth to mere jackals. She condemned her womb and she wished for death: *ye mohara peta ehikshani podu podu / ye nirlaja aatmaa mora sariru bege chaadu* (May this womb of mine be reduced to ashes / May this shameless atma leave my body at once!) (*Gadaa Parva*, 37: 89). Then she upbraided Bhima, cataloguing all the harm that the Kauravas had done him, reminding him of how Duryodhana had humiliated them time and again and how they had spent long and difficult years in the forest. She reminded them of all the miseries and deprivations they had gone through. Doubtful that Bhima was no longer as strongly motivated as earlier to kill the Kauravas, she reminded him of his oath to kill the hundred sons of Gandhari. She condemned his fighting prowess and denounced his favourite weapons. She virtually called him a coward for having senselessly killed the innocents and leaving the real enemy unharmed. He had succeeded, she said, in killing only packs of jackals and had run away from the lion: *srikaalajutha maarina*
singha dekhi palaai ailen (Killing packs of jackals, you fled away on seeing the lion) *(Gadaa Parva, 38: 95).* She rebuked Arjuna and Yudhisthira too for failing to kill Duryodhana, before turning to Bhima again.

In such outpourings, Destiny comes either at first or at last. In Kunti’s case it came at last. We took refuge in you and fought the war, she shouted at him. She blamed him squarely for her disappointment. If the worthless sons of hers turned out to be a thoroughly degraded lot (*modha* (mudha, in formal Odia), *paamara*, *hina mati*, all strong terms of abuse), why did he, Krishna, have to be negligent, she asked him. She denounced his divinity, his divine *aayudhas* (*sankha*, *cakra*, *gadaa*, and *padma*) and all his deeds. May his name as the friend of the universe be damned, she said: *jagannaatha naama tora jagata baandhaba pana / seh tohara dhika heu he naarayana* (You bear the name Jagannatha and you have the reputation as the friend of the universe / May that name be disgraced, O Narayana) *(Gadaa Parva, 39: 112).* Before she could utter one word more, Bhima thundered at her; like Arjuna, Bhima would not tolerate the berating of Krishna by any one whatsoever. “Boulders are coming out of your words”, he thundered at her, and raised his fist to silence her. Krishna pacified him, but this part of the narrative is of no relevance for the present, and must be skipped.

Incidentally, Yudhisthira, Draupadi and Kunti, all blamed Krishna when things did not take a satisfactory turn from their respective points of view. But at the end of the war, each of them claimed sole credit for victory in the war, as we already know from the Belalasena episode. Krishna was not there in the mind of any Pandava at that time; neither was he there in the mind of Draupadi or Kunti. Quite naturally though; for his misfortune man has always blamed destiny, and for his success, he has always credited himself. That is part of being human. Subhadra alone in the Pandava household credited Krishna for the victory. This unambitious, self-effacing, quiet and simple-hearted woman understood things better; such people often seem to do. But in any case, wasn’t she Krishna’s sister!

One could go on and on, recounting episodes after episodes structured with the language of violence. *Suaralaa Mahaabhaarata* is a narrative of envy and hatred, as is any retelling of the
classical story. So where is love, and if it is there, what is the nature of that love? There is no romantic love or longing or agony on account of frustration or jealousy in love, despite there being possibilities for the same. For instance, Arjuna won Draupadi but had to share her with others. When a woman had five claimants to her affection, there would be jealousy and hurt as well. Subhadra longed for Arjuna but had to undergo a period of considerable uncertainty before she could marry him. She could do so only after a ferocious fight in which the Pandavas, Krishna, Balarama, the Yadava army and the Kauravas were all involved in a complex manner. She was united with Arjuna even before they were married, but passion, not love, is the pervasive tone of the narrative describing her mood as she desired him, made efforts to reach him and finally, was united with him. There is the description of their love making but there are hardly any expressions of tenderness and affection in it. It is reminiscent of that ultimate expression of passion in Aadi Parva of Saaralaa Mahaabharata: Krishna’s wild love making to Radha’s emissary to him. So impatient was he for Radha that he did not realize until it was over that the one he had made love to was not Radha, but an elderly woman. Here the narrative is almost depressing; the language is crude and graceless and the style, racy. Incidentally, the child born out this union in due course became a thief by profession; he was an extraordinary person (the poet does not seem to want us to forget that he was Krishna’s child after all) who served the divine purpose when at Vidura’s instruction he dug an underground tunnel for the Pandavas to escape from the blazing lac palace. He then disappeared from the narrative. Now Krishna’s love making was without a loving word and without a thought about the one he was making love to (Aadi Parva I: 522-526). If Sarala did not explore the tenderness and beauty of romantic love in his narrative, it might be due to the relevant social values prevalent in Odisha in his time, which presumably did not allow any new open discourse on the subject – “new” in the sense that Jayadeva’s Geeta Govinda a remarkable classic of love poetry composed in great lyrical grace was already there. But more importantly and most likely, it had to do with his attitude to extra-marital relationship. He looked upon passion as low and degrading, and considered all non-marital relationships as the outcome of mere passion, and on that account entirely immoral. He recognized the existence of such relationships in the society by depicting them in his narrative but expressed his disapproval for the same by dealing with them sometimes only briefly and dismissively and sometimes with a distinct tone of disgust. It is not inappropriate to say that in the Odishan cultural context, his Mahaabhaaarata was an antidote to the Geeta Govinda style of celebration of extra-marital love.
Love in Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata is mainly about parental and brotherly love. Some of the most striking instances of such love occur in the episodes of Kunti’s going to the forest along with Gandhari and Dhritarashtra, Duryodhana’s suffering on seeing the severed heads of Draupadi’s sons, as he himself lay dying, and Yudhisthira’s sorrow on seeing Duryodhana lying mortally wounded. The Pandavas were upset when their mother Kunti decided to go to the forest. She had suffered with her sons but when they became rulers, she chose to give up the luxuries and comforts of life in the palace for a life of hardship in the forest. This is how she explained her decision to her son, the king Yudhisthira, in privacy: Gandhari and Dhritarashtra were both blind; one by choice, the other, by birth. In the forest they would suffer on that account, and each time they would get hurt, they would curse him for being the cause of the death of their sons and of their plight in their old age. By being with them and by serving them, she would alleviate their suffering and thereby shield him from the curse of the family elders (Aashramika Parva, 29: 196-199). The love that protects the loved ones is founded on suffering and self-sacrifice; therefore the expression of such love is not in celebratory terms, but in those of the serenity and calm that arises out of pain and the willing acceptance of it.

Kunti had lost her first-born. Whether the loss of a hundred sons is more agonizing than the loss of just one son, only the mother can tell. Sarala’s Kunti had found no relief in the fact that five of her sons were alive and only one was dead. And that dead son was the one who she had not given protection, leave alone care and love. She had floated him on the streams of the river to his own fate and then had virtually sent him to his death when she made him extremely vulnerable in the battlefield by dispossessing him of his unfailing divine weapons: neela vaana and bhuja baana. She told Gandhari and Yudhisthira that she was unable to bear the loss of her son. She had to renounce her status of queen mother and leave the palace. In describing so sensitively Kunti’s memories and regrets with respect to Karna, Sarala gives us some memorable poetry of love which only the loss of the loved one can give rise to.

As the day broke, the dying Duryodhana realized that what Aswasthama had brought for him were not the severed heads of the Pandavas, but of the five sons of Draupadi. Completely shattered, he rebuked Aswasthama and rejected him most unceremoniously. He reproached himself for his act of desperation in appointing the degenerate (nasta, as he called him)
Aswasthama as his commander-in-chief, thereby holding himself squarely responsible for the death of the children. He asked Durdasā, to whom Yudhisthira had assigned the responsibility of looking after him as he lay dying (protecting him from vultures, jackals, etc.), to place the heads on his chest, and embracing these, he breathed his last (Kaainsikaa Parva, 10: 60-71). This again is a narrative of love expressed in terms of agony and loss.

Yudhisthira’s anguish was great when he saw Duryodhana fall on the ground with his thigh crushed. He spoke to him as an elder would speak to his dear younger brother who had strayed and had paid a very heavy price for it (Gadāa Parva, 94-97: 106-.141). He chided him for his arrogance and stubbornness, which, he said, had brought about the complete annihilation of the Kauravas. But his were not the words of insult of a victor to a defeated and dying man, but of love – of a grieving, fond and helpless elder brother. He told him that he had undergone much suffering in order not to see that day. And Duryodhana knew they were sincere. Those were the words of love, of love not unmixed with suffering. And that suffering was not of the romantic kind glorified in facile literature. He had explored love beyond Gitagovinda and had expressed his understanding of it in the language of agony and despair. That for Sarala was the appropriate language of deep abiding love.
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