

Mohini

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Lord Krishna has come back empty-handed. The negotiations he had had with Kauravas have failed. Duryodhana had thundered that his cousins Pandavas would not get land worth the size of five needles, let alone five villages. The kingdom was out of question.

Thirteen years ago, in a reckless gambling binge, Pandavas has lost all that they had. Pandavas, the five righteous sons of Kunti and Kauravas, the hundred sons of Gandhari are cousins; their fathers, Pandu and Dhritarashtra respectively, were brothers. Dhritarashtra, the older brother, the king, was blind by birth and therefore his ultra-dedicated wife Gandhari vowed herself to blindness by tying a cloth over her eyes, always. Even when her hundred children were born, she refused to see them, but cared for them better than any woman despite her blindness.

Pandu had his five children, the Pandavas, with Kunti. Well technically five but in reality five plus one. Karna was born out of wedlock and we will leave it at that because Mahabharata, the story of the Kuru dynasty, is dirty as we go deeper and deeper; interesting reality, but dirty, and one has to have the stomach to take it.

Anyways, the cousins grew up together, in the same palace, learning from the same teachers and so on. As they aged and entered teenage years, however, they started hating each other just as any normal cousins would. The problem was that their hatred was fueled and fanned by one particular uncle, Shakuni.

It was Pandu who so loved his blind brother that he got him married to beautiful Gandhari. Gandhari's brother Shakuni felt that his sister was wronged and took upon himself to destroy Pandu's family. He was always there for the brothers pitting Padavas against Kauravas and vice versa

and making sure the hatred between them reached epic proportions.

If you study Mahabharata all the way back to its origin and all the way to its ultimate conclusion, you will notice that there is a definite and extremely interesting relation and reason for each and every event that happens. In fact, in hind sight, it appears that there was no other way Mahabharata could have happened; it was destined to unfold that way; even the Gods could not have stopped it.

Yudhistira, also called as Dharmaraya – the righteous one – was the eldest Pandava. Like everyone in this world, he too had a weakness – gambling, compulsive gambling. And it is this weakness that Shakuni used as his ultimate ace card to push Padavas to lose everything. One night, when the cousins were betting each other in game after game of all-night game of dice, Shakuni played his tricks. Every throw of the dice by Yudhistira was going wrong. But just like every true gambler, he believed the next throw would be a winner. He bet his clothes, then his jewelry and lost them to Duryodhana. He then bet his four brothers and Shakuni made sure he lost them all. Sanity did not strike him because, remember, he was a true gambler. He bet his kingdom, the part that was to be his, and lost that too. Still, he believed he could win and bet himself and rolled the dice. No! Fate, you see, is ruthless! He lost. He had lost everything he had and, dejected, got up to leave for he had nothing left in his possession. Not his brothers, not his kingdom, not even himself, not even the clothes he was wearing – nothing, and so he rose to leave, head hung low.

At that moment, Shakuni stabbed his bluntest dagger with all the force – that was the magnitude of hate Shakuni had against the Pandavas – and twisted it deep inside Yudhistira and turned the brothers into living corpses, at least for the next thirteen years. The sly Shakuni reminded Yudhistira that he had one more thing left in his possession that was not lost – his wife! Actually the Padavas' wife, for Draupadi was the wife of all the five brothers. And like a sinking man clutching

to a straw, Yudhistira thought he had one more chance to win, and fell for the foxy bait like a ton of bricks.

He bet his wife and made every man hang his head in shame and weep.

As you might have guessed, he lost. Dushasana, the second of the Kaurava brothers, on Duryodhana's command dragged Draupadi by her hair into a court full of shameless, ogling men and went on to disrobe her. Even the shameless cast their sights downwards. Her mighty husbands were helpless because she had been lost in a stupid game of dice, and all they could do was look downwards, clenching their fists in impotent rage. Even the Gods, as I said earlier, could not stop.

But the Gods did intervene. When the evil reaches disproportionate levels, Gods will not sit quietly. Mother Nature knows how to take care of herself; that is one of the main morals of Mahabharata. When Draupadi was spinning fast as her sari was disrobed by Dushasana, as her honor was being brought to question, Lord Krishna heard her prayers and performed his miracle. The sari grew and grew and grew until evil Dushasana fell down, exhausted. Draupadi cursed Duryodhana and how the curse becomes true is a grand story that had to wait for thirteen more years, after the Mahabharata war.

Draupadi let her long hair, by which Dushasana had dragged her, loose for thirteen years. After the war, which Kauravas lost, Duryodhana flees and hides in a lake. Bhima, the middle Pandava and one of Draupadi's husbands, pulls out the sweating Duryodhana – yes, sweating in the lake; he was so frightened – and in the one-on-one wrestle which ensues, shatters Duryodhana's thigh with a massive blow with his mighty mace and brings the blood from the thigh to anoint Draupadi's hair and pacify her. Why the thigh? For, the arrogant Duryodhana had the temerity to taunt Draupadi to “come sit on my lap, because your husbands have failed you.” Hell hath no fury like a woman wronged.

Since the Pandavas had lost it all, they had to give up their kingdom, riches and good life and go live in a forest for twelve years, followed by a year in incognito. At the end of the thirteen years, having satisfied all the requirements, they came back to Kauravas and begged for their kingdom back. They were denied. By now, Padavas' ego had died down considerably and they were willing to settle for five villages instead and sent their benefactor, Krishna as their emissary to negotiate for it. Duryodana, the eldest Kaurava, said no, not five villages, not even land the size of the ends of five needles, he thundered. Fools rush in where angels fear to tread. Fate, you see, had to play its role; how else could the evil Kauravas be punished? After all, Mahabharata is the lore of the victory of the righteous over the evil.

So Krishna, the God, has come back empty handed. He could have changed the turn of events but he did not. Strange are the ways of Gods, and fate.

Now that all diplomatic avenues had been tried and failed, Padavas had no other recourse but to wage a war. But isn't it unethical and immoral to wage a war against your own cousins, against your own blood relation? Against those with whom you had played and grew up with, and that too for a small piece of land? Pandavas were in a dilemma. That's when Lord Krishna preaches his famous Bhagavad Gita and expounds the meaning of Duty – as a greater idea of Dharma – to Pandavas and in particular to Arjuna, the second of the Pandavas.

The essence of the Gita is that one has to do what is right without worrying about the fruits of your actions. Surrender the whole body and soul and the results to Him. Apprehension of results breeds inaction, and inaction is worse than evil action. Mahabharata is a *Dharma-Yudda*, the holy, righteous war, not for land but of right over wrong. What gets killed in the *Dharma-Yudda* is only the body, but the soul lives forever. With these words of wisdom, Padavas are convinced that they are doing the right action and are ready to go forth with their mission.

On the cusp of such a great eighteen-day Mahabharata war, we start this little folklore.

In Hinduism, the religion with 330 million Gods, there is a God for everything. A God for education, wealth, hills, fire, clouds, rain, love, death, everything. There is even a Goddess of wars, Kali, and she had to be made happy so that the Pandavas could win the war. Someone had to be sacrificed, but he had to be a brave warrior. Since Mahabharata was a war of convictions, there was no dearth of brave souls but in the end, three stood out. They were Lord Krishna, Arjuna the second Pandava and the young and flamboyant Iravan.

Who is Iravan?

When the Pandavas were banned into the forest for twelve years, there are many interesting events that take place. Each one tests their strength, physical as well as mental, and their belief in what is right. Each test makes them stronger for the Dharma-Yuddha which of course, they did not anticipate.

One day, when the Pandavas were resting under a tree in the forest, they saw a herd of animals suddenly run helter-skelter; the birds started flying scared. They seemed to be aware of some strange happening nearby. Soon, there was a crackling sound and smell of burnt wood. The forest was on fire! The five brothers with their wife started running, but they soon heard a voice pleading them for help. The brave men that they were, they stopped to hear and help and realized it was the Naga Sarpas, the snake God who was calling to them. He could not slither faster than Agni, the fire God who, for some reason, wanted to devour the forest; maybe too many *rishis* were doing too many *yagnas* and feeding him too much ghee. Agni wanted to soothe his stomach and was jumping from branch to branch, tree to tree and voraciously consuming the forest. Arjuna single handedly fought the fire and rescued the snake God and his family including his daughter, Ulupi, the snake princess.

The Naga Sarpa was of course very thankful to Arjuna, but Ulupi was enamored by the dark, handsome and mighty debonair, Arjuna. She expresses her wish to marry him but Arjuna is vowed to monogamy, to Draupadi. But in Mahabharata, every rule has an exception. Ulupi believes that she is entitled to have what she likes and smuggles him into the underworld of serpents. There, in an intoxicated stupor, he spends time with Ulupi, and the result is a brave son, Iravan. Soon, coming to his senses, he takes leave of Ulupi to return to the lamenting Chitrangada whom he had married based on some other loophole. Ulupi, later on, helps care for Babruvahana, the son of Arjuna and Chitrangada. I had warned you upfront that the roots of the characters of Mahabharata are dirty and one should have the stomach to take it. But the important part for this story is Iravan, the son of Arjuna and the snake princess, Ulupi.

So who among the three should be sacrificed to the Goddess of wars? It could not be Krishna because he was after all, a God himself, and Arjuna had to be there to destroy the evil Kauravas. So it fell upon Iravan the brave son of Arjuna.

When Iravan was informed that he was the chosen one, he was filled with joy. The joy was that he was even considered, let alone selected, for such an important task; the joy that he could contribute to the victory of right over evil, joy of martyrdom and he agreed wholeheartedly. But he wanted some of his own wishes to be fulfilled and asked for three boons. One was that he wanted to participate in the war for at least three days. The second boon he wished was to be able to witness the Mahabharata war in its entirety. And the third and final wish was that he wanted to be married before death so that he could get a funeral rather than a burial which was what a bachelor would get.

The elders agreed to all the three boons and set about looking for a wife. The trouble was, in the middle of the battlefield, there weren't any suitable women. After much

thought, it was decided that Krishna, himself an avatar of Vishnu, would transform himself into a maiden. Accordingly, Krishna transformed into Mohini, a beautiful lady!

And what a beauty she was! Not only beautiful but extremely seductive from head to toe! Iravan was elated but had to hold his horses because Lord Shiva, one of the Hindu Trinity, whose eyes fell on Mohini was smitten by her and he wanted her. Even though his consort, Parvathi, was by his side, Shiva forgets her and jumps around Mohini like a drunken monkey. He chases her all over, falling down many times and makes a fool of himself. Parvathi tries to chastise him, but his heart and head had gone south. Was it her curly, jet black locks of hair hanging down the sides of her bewitchingly cute face, adorning it? Or was it her stunning gait, or her beckoningly dark, bumblebee like eyes? Whatever it was, Shiva was swept off his feet. He accused her that she would kill him one day because her beauty takes away his breath. When Mohini giggled that away with her thousand-watt giggle, Shiva could take it no more. He went down on his knees and started begging Mohini to let him be her tresses so that he could caress her face all the time! Boundless – in magnitude as well as in pervasiveness – is the imbecility of the infatuated mind; it permeates amongst the Gods too. Or maybe his heart skipped a few beats and went to play *jokali* (swing) on her shimmy-shimmy shimmering *jumki* (dangling earrings) that she was wearing, we don't know. Eventually Shiva catches Mohini, but sanity strikes him just in time in the form of a sharp glance from Parvathi, sharper than a rock thrown at him, which made his heart shudder with fear and he lets go of Mohini. A calamity was averted.

There were other uses of Mohini's beauty. The Gods and demons had just discovered that nectar, the elixir of life, was to be found at the bottom of the ocean and had churned it out with Mount Mandaranchal as the dasher (churning tool). However, the Gods had no intentions of sharing the nectar with the demons, and sought the help of Mohini. Mohini suggested that the Gods should line up on one side, and the

demons on the other side, and she would serve them both. When Mohini came on scene and served, the demons went wild seeing her captivating beauty. Each one of them leapt from his spot, forgetting the bowl of nectar in front of him, and tried to grab the beautiful damsel. Mohini of course was adept at giving each of them a slip, but the bowl of nectar was jumped all over and spilt into the soil. It was too late when the demons realized what had happened and that's how Gods became immortal and demons, not!

Our Gods, you have to remember, are fair, especially Lord Shiva. Not only that, it is very easy to avail of his blessings; one simply has to have *Bhakti*, or total, unquestioned devotion. Many times, this fairness is misused by the demons such as Ravana, Bhasmasura and others who, despite their barbarous personalities, were ardent devotees of Shiva. Bhasmasura, for example, performed rigorous penance for many years and gets a boon from Shiva. The boon was that on whose ever head he placed his hand upon, they would burn into ashes. With this new found strength, one can image the havoc created by Bhasmasura, destroying his enemies, threatening people and looting them, or just having a barbarian pleasure. In fact he became so arrogant that he wanted to try it on Shiva himself, and Shiva had to run from him! He sought the help of Mohini and this time he behaves properly.

What does Mohini do? Of course she uses her beauty. She goes to Bhasmasura's den and humors him. The ugly looking demon with his huge potbelly and fang-like teeth melts like butter in front of her and follows her around, like a little puppy, acting chubby-chubby silly. Soon he starts imitating her walk, mannerisms and actions, and she starts dancing. The dance started slow and soon gained speed and Mohini soon became the dance, graceful and flirtatious, making her even more beautiful. Step for step Bhasmasura imitates her as well as he could, for he was never couth or agile for such a sophisticated artistry as dancing. She puts out her palm like a lotus flower, he does so. She swings her hips, he swings his. She rolls her eyes and dances her slender neck, he does the same. She stretches her leg and daintily touches the ground

with the tip of her toes; ditto. She raises her hand and sticks out her palm, he raises his. She raises her right hand over her head and lays it on it, with only the three middle fingers touching, thumb tucked in, and the little finger cutely sticking out; Bhasmasura follows suit and burns into ashes; end of story.

Men lose it all in front of a beautiful woman and become like dough that can be molded into anything; it is like a rebirth, if you are lucky that is, or else she could be your death knell.

Lest we forget, recollect that Mohini came into existence for Iravan who was waiting patiently. The two were married and spend few days and nights together and in that brief period, experienced all the bliss of a joyful married life. They loved and respected each other like there was no tomorrow. Pleased, Iravan is now ready for the noble sacrifice to Kali, the Goddess of wars.

A feast was arranged wherein everybody came and submitted themselves to the young couple, Iravan and Mohini. Iravan was treated like God and offerings such as fruits, milk, jewels, were made. There were lots of beautiful dances and music and festivities went on from morning to night. Iravan was worshipped with greatest devotion and was honored and thanked for his great sacrifice. He knew what was coming, but he did not show any fear or sadness. He was really, really ready.

The sacrificial platform was washed with water, milk and honey and decorated with beautiful flowers. It was worshipped with at most devotion and care by everybody, and the young couple themselves offered their prayers to the platform last. As the Sun sank low in the west, the auspicious time was chosen and Iravan, with his bride, was led to the sacrificial platform. He walked up to it, after prostrating to his knees to all the elders such as his father Arjuna, his uncles and teachers and taking their blessings.

The drums started picking up speed, rhythm and sound, not to mask away the sniffles but to invoke all the Gods and announce to them of the great sacrifice that is about to happen. All the Gods came and blessed Iravan and showered rose petals on him. He then embraced Mohini one last time and bid her goodbye, and placed his head on the platform. The executioner's sword dazzled in the red light of the evening Sun and came down on Iravan's neck. The pain was not felt because the Goddess of pain came running and scooped up all the pain from the body, and the head, and held it to her heart on her lap and soothed Iravan into a calm, painless and peaceful sleep.

Not a single tear was shed until then by anybody. But now, Mohini could not take it anymore. Her husband who loved her so much, for whom alone she was born, was dead. She let out a wail so loud that it reached the other side of the world, to the heavens and beyond. Like a possessed woman, she ran aimlessly from this man to that, bawling the plight of her husband and begging them to do something. Utterly devastated, she crumpled to her knees and beat her chest, unable to withstand the agony of death and prayed the Gods to give back her Iravan; she pulled her hairs out, scratched her face, dug her fingernails into her belly as if to pull out the guts, stretched out her arms at the heavens and pleaded "let me have him just one more day." She lamented that it was unfair for him to die so young, even if for a great sacrifice; she offered herself instead. She held on to Iravan and begged "please, please, come back. What have you done?"

The crying and wailing went on deep into the middle of the night. Exhausted, she fell down and went into a slumber only to wake up and start wailing all over again, as if her renewed cries with much more vigor would move the death God, Yama. Any other mortal woman would have cursed for taking her love away but, after all, Mohini was Goddess herself; she did not curse, but cried and cried until all her tears were dried up. As the wailing slowed down and her jeremiad stopped, the Sun God rose in the east. Lord Krishna had to take over and lead the Pandavas to victory. Mohini started transforming into Krishna. Her curly hair vanished

gradually into straight, flowing, neck length hair. Her slender, fair colored body became dark, strong, tall and masculine like that of a warrior. Soon the top portion of Mohini's dress changed into *kavacha*, *choker* into garland, and sari into *kachhe* and the *baitale bottu* on her head into his crown. The transformation was complete and Lord Krishna stood up with his *abhaya-hasta*, the blessing palm, raised up. Everybody bows to him and to Iravan and start getting ready for eighteen days of Mahabharata war.

How about Iravan's other wishes? He wanted to witness the Mahabharata war in its entirety. Krishna comes to the rescue with a miracle. A tall pole, about one hundred feet high, was erected in the middle of the battlefield and on top of it, Iravan's head was placed. Krishna breathed life into it and Iravan was able to witness the entire Mahabharata war from there. After the war, Iravan ascends to the heavens.

In many temples of Tamil Nadu and Singapore, you can see the statue of a head with eyes wide open, erected on top of a pillar, or on top of the tomb of the temple. This is an iconic representation of Iravan witnessing the Mahabharata war.

The first wish of Iravan was satisfied by Krishna's trickery. Krishna had felt jealous because he knew that if Iravan fought in the war, even for three days, the mighty Iravan would be more glorious than himself. So Krishna tells Iravan that for a mighty warrior like him, three days is like three seconds. Iravan is carried away by the praise and agrees. Accordingly, Krishna breathes life into Iravan for three seconds which will be over in just three seconds!

Krishna is not always very straight-forward and lives by the attitude that the end justifies the means.